

BOOK REVIEW

Ecstatic Religion : An Anthropological Study of Spirit  
Possession and Shamanism

I.M. Lewis. Pelican. 1971.

Prof. Lewis's recent book is an ambitious functionalist-comparative study of an aspect of religion which he claims has been neglected by social anthropologists. As the editor of *Man* and head of anthropology at the London School of Economics we can expect his work to be eagerly read by his colleagues. And as the book appears in paperback in a series designed to show the subject off to a wider public we must expect it to be fairly influential. Lewis is aware that his enterprise requires special pleading, and he is careful to avoid some of those ethnocentric errors which marred an earlier comparative tradition; for instance, he does not rank religious systems as the Victorians were wont to do, nor does he engage in speculation over the genesis of religion as such. Nevertheless, his endeavour seems to be marred by several rather profound methodological errors which ought to be exposed.

Firstly, he says that 'cultural distinctions' are 'often of much less consequence than functional similarities' (pp. 13-14). This, he suggests, is 'generally taken for granted in most of the fields in which social anthropologists work'. This stance enables him to ignore conceptual levels, categorical and linguistic problems and so to violate the cultural logic which one had assumed it was the task of the anthropologist to grasp. Hocart (1935) asks: 'How can we make any progress in the understanding of culture if we persist in dividing what the people join and in joining what they keep apart?' Lewis seems to have learned nothing from the ghastly failures of others who have attempted comparative work. Hocart's point, of course, does not make comparison impossible, but it does require the venture to be conducted with certain special types of conceptual tools; of this formal requirement Lewis seems completely unaware. The point is to generate generalities from grasping cultural significance not to confirm general theories through riding roughshod over cultural meanings by wielding some sociological hypothesis like possession is a means by which women protest about their jural inferiority, etc. This is where the difference between Lévi-Strauss's and Lewis's comparative work lies. It isn't a matter of Gallic splendour but a simple methodological superiority in Lévi-Strauss's work. One only wished that Radcliffe-Brown, whose idea of anthropology as comparative sociology still sets the task for Lewis in 1971, had actually engaged in some extensive project himself, then it would have emerged rather sooner just how unproductive the enterprise would prove.

All comparative work involves a problem of sources. We cannot evaluate Lewis's performance in this respect. What is worrying, because it does not seem to trouble his (down-to-earth commonsense) sociological approach, is the categories with which he performs his analysis. Let us remember the one time commonsense certainty that the earth was flat; sociological commonsense is no more privileged simply by virtue of its being a part of an established academic discipline. We are aware of the difficulties involved in using such terms as 'pathological' and 'hysterical' in our own culture; the problems concerning their application to other cultures are even more considerable. For instance, the concept of deviant would qualify as an 'odd-job' word (Wittgenstein) in our own category system. We cannot simply plonk it into another system of discourse without serious thought. But the objection does not stop with these psychological terms which are easily recognisable as being awkwardly culture bound. What qualification can we assume 'mystical', 'witchcraft', 'ancestor cult' or even 'religion' to possess that fit them for comparative purposes? Or

may we assume that these categories are used as 'automatically' (p.21) as the questions that Lewis asks?

If Lewis really wants to indulge in this type of comparative work he should at least bear in mind Evans-Pritchard's remark on the Frazerian style of analysis. That is, he should compare in their completeness the situations of possession among the Eskimos, hysteria in a London mental hospital and the experiences of a Christian saint in order to determine whether such a category as ecstasy genuinely subsumes these disparate phenomena. After all, it is only in the fullness of context that the terminology has any meaning at all, and without this contextualisation it may not be realized that ecstasy, in reality, is of as little explanatory use as the term matrilineal. It is only too obvious that we as yet simply do not understand enough about different modes of consciousness to embark on Lewis's type of venture. Why, for instance, is there no mention of James's The Varieties of Religious Experience which one had assumed would have some relevance? At least it would make the difficulties rather plainer. All Lewis does by seeing possession or witchcraft as protests against society or symbolic strategies of attack is to create a category of anomalous behaviour which requires a special type of explanation. In fact it is exactly the same procedure that the Victorians employed in their treatment of primitive belief and which Evans-Pritchard had already cogently criticized. Frazer assumes context and purpose are obvious and then imputes certain mental processes to savages. Lewis, in his way, repeats all these errors - and then charges Lévi-Strauss with being a neo-Frazerian! This criticism holds even though Lewis (p.36) claims his treatment is not to be regarded as a complete explanation. Lewis, and here he is in good keeping with most sociologists, (and the complete opposite of Evans-Pritchard) simply seems to have no feeling for culture. We cannot feel that resort to such concepts as 'deprivation' or 'ecstasy', really enables him to grasp the 'meaning' of any of the examples he discusses. It only confirms his sociological qualities that he should not really be concerned with meaning at all. As such his book strikes us neophyte Oxford anthropologists as vulgar in the same way as Gluckman's Custom and Conflict sociology. Lewis simply doesn't seem to sense how systems of meaning should be understood. The 'validity of my comparisons should be judged by their inherent plausibility and by the extent to which they contribute to the understanding of religious experience'. We remain unconvinced, and the use of example after example would do nothing to enhance the plausibility of the analysis.

We ought also to enter a comment concerning his statement that the importance of functional similarities as against cultural distinction is accepted by most anthropologists. True this might be of those in the backwaters of British social anthropology, but, as with his questions that the social anthropologist 'automatically asks' (p.21) we can only say it is not true of all. Many anthropologists have radically different interests to these displayed by Lewis and it is interesting that the newest anthropological trends receive no bibliographical mention in his book. Not even that sensitive study by Lienhardt of Dinka self-knowledge in Divinity and Experience receives a mention. When Lévi-Strauss gets a treatment that is nothing short of juvenile (p. 14-15) it is clear that we cannot accept Lewis's claim to speak for anthropologists. In fact, it is quite clear (p.30) that his approach and pre-occupations are consciously sociological. Perhaps a sociologist's evaluation of Ecstatic Religion would be different, but we can only feel embarrassment that in 1971 the title should contain the word anthropological. It is also laughable that he should regard it as bravery (p.178) to consider psychology and thus to extend the provenance of anthropology. One is reminded of that other London pronouncement in Jarvie's 1964 book 'over to Lévi-Strauss' when other departments had been there years before.

If Lewis's book represents anthropology to the general public as a rapidly changing discipline, one can only feel that the direction implied is the wrong one. Anthropology can advance by redefining its problems. Lewis seems unaware of this and is content to produce answers to problems set by his forbears. Here he is in good company. There are still departments where anthropologists devise good measures of divorce rates or where students are encouraged to produce excellent definitions of age-sets. All this refinement is of no value if the problem itself was originally ill-conceived. It is like expending a great amount of energy to establish the exact weight of phlogiston. Lewis's Ecstatic Religion strikes us as similarly outdated and misdirected. There seems to be a vast difference of interests between ourselves and the Professor at L.S.E., and to use a joke he himself uses, we can only hope that enthusiasm for his type of work is not catching.

Two Diploma Students.