

DICTIONARIES AND PODISM

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Podism? Foot-fetishism, perhaps, or a branch of chiropody? Neither; podism is a state of mental bias, like sexism and racism. Podism is the attitude that all civilization, science, and culture originated in the Northern Hemisphere, and continues to be confined to that hemisphere. The derivation of my neologism will become clear when I say that I am an antipodist.

Take the word "Antipodes" itself. Logically it means "places on the surfaces of the earth directly opposite to each other" (so the OED), so that people in the Northern Hemisphere are antipodal to us southerners from Australia. But, to a podist, "Antipodes" is often seen as equivalent to "Southern Hemisphere". In retaliation, I suggest that we call the Northern Hemisphere the "Podes", and the antiscians (that's another good word!) who live there "Pod-eans". And the bias characteristic of such people, regardless of the hemisphere in which they happen to live, is podism.

Podism in dictionaries is widespread - and, while it is to be expected in dictionaries produced in the Northern Hemisphere, it is not confined to them. Both the Australian-produced Macquarie Dictionary (MD) (Southern Hemisphere) and Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary (Northern Hemisphere) give "anti-clockwise" as a second meaning of widdershins/withershins. As the word is good Anglo-Saxon for "against the direction" (of the sun), it is clear that the direction is clockwise in the Southern Hemisphere. It is even possible to object that our use of "clockwise" is ultimately podist, since the only reason that clocks and watches go clockwise is that they follow the direction of the shadow on a Northern Hemisphere sundial. Southern Hemisphere watches should go "anticlockwise" - and equatorial watches should go back and forth. (Digital watches avoid the problem entirely.)

Incidentally, the MD labels widdershins as "archaic", but it continues to be used as technical jargon in occult circles. Southern Hemisphere witches are caught in a bind: with their interest in nature-worship, should they dance clockwise when they go widdershins (traditionally the direction of black magic), or is the cultural interference from their northern ancestors too strong? It is to be noted that Christian priests usually process clockwise round the altar when they want to go deasil (the rare antonym of widdershins); but I have observed Russian Orthodox Easter ceremonies in Australia where the circumambulation is anticlockwise, following the path of the Australian sun. Australian aboriginals have a preference for sunwise - Australian anticlockwise - motion, and a large

number of tribesmen in Papua New Guinea dance, equatorially, back and forth. This would seem to be a good subject for some University dissertation.

Podism is even embedded in Northern Hemisphere languages. In the Semitic languages, and in Welsh, the word for "right" is often related to the word for "south" - because, in their homelands, when one faces the rising sun in the east the sun at noon will be on one's right hand. For the same reason, French and Italian use their words for "noon" to mean "south".

Back to dictionaries. The words most prone to podist entries are the seasons and calendrical feasts, signs of the Zodiac, and words like "solstice" and "equinox". Podism may creep in whenever a date or reference to a season is used - such as, for example, defining the Zodiac sign "Capricorn" as a "winter sign".

MD manages to avoid most of these problems, but does give a Northern Hemisphere diagram to illustrate the phases of the moon (which, if you didn't know, are reversed when viewed from the Southern Hemisphere). (In the same way, the booklet accompanying a popular pack of Tarot cards describe the Moon card as showing the moon "on the side of her increase" - without specifying the hemisphere.)

Words like "Far East" and "Middle East" embody both podist and Occidental thinking, but are probably too entrenched in the language to do anything about. Nor can we do much about the literary associations of "south" (tropical, friendly, indolent, backward) and "north" (cold, hostile, and the home of the dead). But it is perhaps time for dictionary-makers to realise that there are two inhabited hemispheres, and to reflect this in their dictionaries, especially dictionaries intended for use in the Southern Hemisphere. There is no reason for an Australian or South African dictionary to be aggressively antipodean, or antipodist, but there is equally no reason to confuse the children of the Southern Cross and the Aurora Australis by perpetuating podism.