THE CONSTRUCTION OF
ANTHROPOLOGICAL GENEALOGIES:
ROBERT HERTZ, VICTOR TURNER
AND THE STUDY OF PILGRIMAGE

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Thanks to the well-publicized work of Victor Turner most anthropologists today consider pilgrimage a worthy object of study. Even though his particular approach has been incisively criticized, in their analyses many ethnographers still refer in a laudatory manner to his ideas. These and other ethnographers continue to regard him as a pioneer in this intellectual field. They persist in assessing him as a noteworthy practitioner, whose work may now be seen as somewhat misguided, but whose crucial role in at the very least initiating the debate over the study of pilgrimage cannot be questioned. For these people, Turner was an academic frontiersman actively pushing forward the boundaries of anthropological knowledge: he may have chosen the wrong path but, as far as they are concerned, he did set out in the right direction.

The trouble with this view of 'Turner-as-trailblazer' is that it ignores the work on the topic by Robert Hertz, work carried out more than sixty years before Turner's. Since Andrew Duff-Cooper greatly admired Hertz's work, it seems appropriate that a contribution to this Memorial Issue should seek to re-present the history of pilgrimage studies, to re-evaluate an otherwise relatively neglected part

I am grateful to Nico Momigliano for her help, and to Glenn Bowman, Rodney Needham, John Palmer and Robert Parkin for comments on a draft of this paper.
of Hertz's writings, and to uncover the structural causes of this neglect. In order to appreciate the innovative nature of his work we need, however, to review briefly the ideas and errors of Victor Turner.

For Turner the purpose of pilgrimage is the creation of what he terms 'communitas', which is to be seen as the opposite of social structure. To him, the most distinctive form of this phenomenon is spontaneous communitas, which he defines as 'the direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities which tends to make those experiencing it think of mankind as a homogeneous, unstructured, and free community' (Turner 1974: 169). As people embark on a pilgrimage they are said to move from the familiar, or quotidian, towards the anti-structural; freed from obligatory everyday constraints, they are supposed to undergo communitas and then to return to their more common, structured way of life. Thus pilgrimage, as he portrays it, comes to represent 'a mutually energizing compromise between structure and communitas' (ibid.: 208). He argues that this style of communitas cannot sustain itself: 'under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources, and the necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of these goals, the existential communitas is organized into a perduing social system' (Turner 1969: 132). This new mode of social organization, which he calls normative communitas, characterizes the most common social bond between the majority of participants at a pilgrimage.

It is not perhaps surprising that Turner, who first spoke of these ideas in the late 1960s, explicitly associated communitas with the hippies. According to him, these alternative characters emphasize 'spontaneity, immediacy, and “existence”'; they stress 'personal relationships rather than social obligations, and regard sexuality as a polymorphic instrument of immediate communitas rather than as a basis for an enduring social tie' (ibid.: 112–13). Like optimistic pilgrims, they hoped to enter a creative communion with their fellows.

Turner's notion of spontaneous communitas might have appealed to the hippies but, unfortunately for him (and for them), his ideas do not square with the ideas and errors of Victor Turner.

1. For laudatory references by ethnographers to Turner's work on pilgrimage see, for example, Geertz 1983: 26–30, Graburn 1983, Daniel 1987: 245–87, Neville 1987, Mitchell 1988, Kendall 1991, and Pollak-Eltz 1991. For the latest—and perhaps most effusive—example of praise for 'Turner-the-trailblazer', see Naquin and Yu 1992. Hertz's work on St Besse was so little discussed by Oxford anthropologists that even such an admirer of his work as Andrew Duff-Cooper seems to have been unaware of it when he wrote on Balinese pilgrimage (1988). As far as I am aware, the only paper in English to draw on the example of 'St Besse' is Bowman 1992. Even the latest general assessment of the anthropology of pilgrimage (Eade and Sallnow (eds.) 1991) fails to make any reference to it. Robert Parkin's forthcoming intellectual biography of Hertz, however, does devote a chapter to it. I am grateful to Glenn Bowman for originally drawing my attention to the importance of 'St Besse'.
ethnographic record. Quite simply, communitas—as he conceives it—does not characterize what occurs during most pilgrimages. Sallnow, studying group pilgrimage in the Andes, found that pilgrims did not encounter one another in the direct, immediate manner prescribed by Turner. The focal shrines they visited may have been associated with a universalistic cosmology, but the behaviour of the pilgrims, far from expressing a sense of unrestricted fellowship, was characterized by nepotism, factionalism, endemic competition and inter-community conflict. The egalitarianism upheld during the pilgrimages Sallnow attended was not the equality of brotherhood but of opposition. As he summarizes it:

Such divisiveness is a direct consequence of pilgrimage, which temporarily abrogates the pattern of structured social relations and creates a supra-local arena in which novel social alignments and configurations may arise. As the purported goal of pilgrimage the notion of communitas is spurious, and leads to a deterministic view of what is essentially a polymorphic phenomenon. (Sallnow 1981: 163)

At times, Turner attempts to explain pilgrimage in psychologistic terms. He regards individuals in complex societies devoid of corporate matrices as obsessed with the problem of personal salvation. The increasing weight of responsibility for decisions the maturing individual must make becomes too much to bear on one’s own. For wearied souls who wish to be relieved of such anxieties, pilgrimage is one of the solutions, one of the transcendental sources of support and legitimacy. Communitas is thus to be viewed as a form of ‘release’ or ‘salvation’ from ‘the role-playing games which embroil the personality in manifold guiles, guilts, and anxieties’ (Turner 1974: 200, 203). In other words Turner, who openly acknowledges his debt to Freud (Turner 1978), uses a particular kind of Western psychology to explain a universal social phenomenon. But to reduce a complex social event to general emotional terms is to ignore all other aspects of the occurrence and to discount their possible importance (Morinis 1984: 261). On top of that, privileging one specific type of psychology at the total expense of local forms, however developed, is to deny indigenous commentaries any validity. Any ethnography of a pilgrimage must take into account the ways the participants themselves speak of the event and how it affects them. Of course, any local explanation couched in terms denoting inner mental states could be compared with one framed in English psychological terminology, but that would be a very different procedure from the one Turner advocates.

Turner emphasizes that pilgrimage is a liminal phenomenon. Like rites of passage, it has an initiatory character. In tribal societies, the major initiation rites of puberty are the dominant historical form of ordered anti-structure. In patrimonial feudal systems they are succeeded by pilgrimage (Turner 1974: 166,

But there is in fact little evidence to back up the similarity claimed by Turner between these two ritual processes. Many pilgrimages do not evince any initiatory character and do not mark a change in the social status of the pilgrim (Morinis 1984: 258–9). Simply because Turner uses the same terminology to describe aspects of both sets of phenomena does not imply that they perform the same ritual function, and any possible value of the ritual parallel he has drawn disappears when his own model of pilgrimage is so gravely called into question.

The greatest defect of Turner’s approach, however, is that he sees pilgrimage as an autonomous entity, independent of what is going on in the rest of society. He pays no regard to the distribution of power within society or to the possible ways pilgrimage may be exploited by those seeking hegemony. Thinking of it as a form of ‘anti-structure’ outside the realms of social structuration, he ignores the fact that pilgrimages may well be an integral part of the forms utilized by seekers of secular power. Moreover, Turner regards pilgrimages as symbolic forms whose meaning, if at times relatively opaque, is already given. But the elite controlling the performance of the ritual can manipulate the multivocality of the usually employed symbols and forms for their own interested ends. By exploiting the discourse they can try to dictate how the event is to be interpreted. In an attempt to further their ends, they may also alter aspects of the rite and introduce winning innovations. In other words, the performance and structure of a pilgrimage may well be affected by social forces beyond the immediate context of the event itself, and one must pay attention to these in order to be able to begin to understand what is going on.

In 1913—more than fifty years before Victor Turner had even started to analyse pilgrimage—the Paris-based academic journal *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* published Robert Hertz’s ‘Saint Besse: Etude d’un culte alpestre’.

In the first paragraph of this long paper Hertz posed two questions: ‘What meaning do the faithful give to their annual presence at the Alpine shrine of St Besse, and to the rites they perform there?’, and ‘What is it that brings together in this solitary spot a whole host of people from the neighbouring valleys and even from the plain of Piedmont?’

On 10 August every year the inhabitants of two contiguous Italian Alpine valleys laboriously ascend, from different sides, a mountain pass on which is perched a huge block of shale called St Besse’s Mount. Attached to the rock is a chapel dedicated to the memory of the saint. The congregants attend Mass and then process round the Mount. In the procession, two women wear on their heads wooden frames decorated with brightly coloured ribbons and fabric; strong men...
carry a massive statue of the saint. Once they have finished processing, an auction is held of the valuable possessions donated by many of the faithful. The proceeds go to the treasury of the chapel. Before abandoning themselves to the joys of festive companionship, pilgrims chip off small pieces of the rock to take home; for the faithful regard their patron as a saint of great powers who bestows favours on all those who bother to make their way to his Mount on his feast day:

It would appear at first sight that nothing could be more tranquil or harmonious than the life of this little religious federation, all of whose members seem to be on a strictly equal footing. But this is an illusion. Closer observation reveals that the devotees of St Besse are torn by wranglings, by conflicts of ambition, by struggles sometimes concealed, sometimes open, violent and even bloody. (Hertz 1983: 63)

Five villages are traditionally associated with the rite: Campiglia, Valprato, Ronco and Ingría in the Soana valley, and Cogne in the contiguous valley. At the festival, villagers from Cogne, who have nothing to do with those in the other valley except on 10 August, feel isolated and fear being made objects of ridicule. They are perceived as intruders by villagers from the Soana, especially by those from Campiglia who, as the inhabitants of the oldest settlement in the valley and the one closest to the shrine, regard St Besse as their own special patron. Their claim, as caretakers of the ritual ornaments, to be the only people who should bear them in the processions has led at times to shouts, fights and knifings. As Hertz laments, ‘Poor St Besse! Was it really worth his while to come to settle so high up and so far from humankind, in the mountain wastes, only to become mixed up in the petty riots of his worshippers?’(ibid.: 66).

Hertz then points out that St Besse is also one of the patron saints of Ivrea, the chief city of the diocese in which the Soana valley is located. He argues that the adoption by the city on the plain of the cult from the mountain was but a specific part of the expansionism of Ivrea’s rulers, as they were blocked—for geographical and political reasons—from extending the dominion of their home town in any direction other than westwards across the plain, towards the Soana valley. To back up his argument that St Besse was drawn into Ivrea’s web of influence rather than the city propagating the saintly cult across the plain and up into the Alps, Hertz adduces the local tradition of the theft of the saint’s bones from the Mount by common robbers and their eventual depositing in the vault of the cathedral of Ivrea: having Besse’s bones in its ossuary added to the symbolic capital of the diocesan capital.

Most villagers speak of St Besse as a pious shepherd who was thrown to his death from the Mount by a pair of jealous locals. In contrast, the people of Ivrea speak of St Besse as a Theban legionary who died for his faith, while in former times some Ivreans claimed he was an early bishop of the city. Hertz comments wryly, ‘Having enticed him into their midst, the townsmen have dressed him up to suit their tastes, without even being able to agree among themselves: for some of them have put a bishop’s crook in his hands, and others the legionaries’ sword and the martyrs’ palm’ (ibid.: 79). In other words, the historical personality of St
Besse has been presented in dissimilar ways by two disparate traditions, neither of which sheds any light on the real identity of their common hero, but both of which 'shed a sharp light on the habits of thought and on the psychology of the profoundly different social groups in which they were elaborated' (ibid.). Wherever he is represented, St Besse incarnates the ideals of the local propagators of his cult: to diocesan leaders based in the city he was an upstanding soldier in the ranks of a holy army, or an ecclesiastic who suffered pain and died for the greater glory of his faith; to the villagers he was, like the best of them, devoted to his livestock and persuaded that the highest virtue consisted in abandoning oneself completely to God's care (ibid.: 80).

As to why the faithful of two separate valleys should meet to keep up their common memory of one saint, Hertz points out that Cogne was settled by herdsmen from Campiglia and that, in former times, Cogne villagers maintained a series of links with people in the Soana valley; the walk up to the Mount is the last vestige of those links. As to why the cult is centred on a steep rock, Hertz notes that many rocks in the region have been made holy by their association with a local saint; what one is witnessing here, he argues, is a Catholic transformation of a more ancient cult of the sanctity of rocks. To the final query that he puts to himself—'Where then does the diffuse sanctity of the Mount stem from?'—Hertz provides a Durkheimian answer: the diffuse sanctity comes from 'the faith this obscure mountain people had in themselves and in their ideal, and their will to survive' (ibid.: 86). The rock is sacred because the rite is in fact a celebration by the local society of its own continuance.

Hertz predicted the 'impending disappearance' of the pilgrimage. But when, at my request, Dr Nico Momigliano telephoned the tourist office at Cogne, the folklorist of the town, and the parish priest of Campiglia, she learnt that the annual procession continues, indeed flourishes. If the weather is good on the day, as many as 2000 people may turn up, about 70 of them from Cogne and perhaps an equal, if not greater, number of tourists. Some years the Bishop of Ivrea graces the event with his presence. The statue of the saint is still dutifully carried around the Mount, but the decorated baskets are only taken out of storage on the day if those in charge of the ritual paraphernalia that year feel so inclined. None of the three locals Nico spoke to had heard of Hertz's article, and when she asked the folklorist exactly who carried the statue and baskets each year, the latter replied with a sigh, 'That's a long story.' She did not wish to tell the tale, and only stated that it was usually, but not always, the villagers of Campiglia. It seems that, eighty years after Hertz's visit, the contest over the right to control the cult of St Besse persists.

Given his conclusion, it seems that Hertz regarded his essay as a contribution towards the establishment of a sociology of religion. In his closing paragraphs, he argues that the intellectual fruits of his study show that those who wish to study hagiographical texts should, wherever possible, place the legends they are looking at in their social contexts, and that they should not be scared at the prospect of doing a little fieldwork. In these ways, apparent hagiographical inconsistencies,
such as the different identities of St Besse, could be felicitously resolved in a
genuinely illuminating manner.

It appears to me very likely that Hertz avoided most of the pitfalls to which
Turner was prone—misleading comparison, a universalizing psychologism,
apoliticism—precisely because he was so concerned with the social contexts of the
phenomenon he was studying, and with people’s competitiveness within those
contexts. Turner, in contrast, was not so much concerned with the contexts of
pilgrimage as with its internal structure; extrapolating from his work on the liminal
period in Ndembu rites of passage, he interpreted pilgrimage as a process whereby
pilgrims—supposedly not bothered by points of precedence or prestige—merge
into some sort of unstructured, if temporary, community.

It would appear that rather than following Turner’s approach—generalizing in
a precipitate manner, or postulating some quasi-mystical concept of communitas,
which seems to owe more to the ambience of ‘hippiedom’ than it does to
anthropological theory—it would be best to examine what people actually do in
pilgrimage, how they experience and conceive of it, who controls its staging, how
and why they do so, and how this ritual process fits into the rest of social life.4

It remains to be answered why Hertz’s paper has been neglected for so long. It
seems to me that part of the answer lies in the way Hertz himself, and his
contemporaries, appear to have viewed it. Another part of the answer lies in the
selective manner by which the British champions of the Année Sociologique
emphasized that movement’s intellectual style.

Marcel Mauss, writing in 1922, referred to Hertz’s ‘Contribution To a Study
on the Collective Representation of Death’ and ‘The Pre-Eminence of the Right
Hand’ as his ‘two famous papers’. Mauss also claimed that Hertz regarded ‘St
Besse’ and two other papers as forms of intellectual refreshment, occasional works
he had turned to as a break from his magnum opus—which he was never to
finish—on sin and expiation. According to Mauss, Hertz would rest from his great
work—of which the papers on death and the right hand were mere opening
sections—by ‘entertaining himself with folklore and mythology’. Mauss calls the
‘St Besse’ paper ‘delightful’, but says that, for Hertz, it was but a pastime (Mauss
1969 [1922]: 494, 510). In other words, Mauss liked the paper, but because it
dealt with a European, and not a geographically exotic, social phenomenon, it
could not be ranked as anthropology, merely as folklore. By classifying it as a
form of relaxation, and so playing down its potential importance, Mauss failed to
state that Hertz’s analysis of the Alpine pilgrimage directly challenged Durkheim’s

4. One chapter of my forthcoming ethnography of the postwar evolution of the Spanish Carlist
Party analyses in this manner the annual pilgrimage by the party faithful to the small Navarran
mountain of Montejurra.
characterization of ritual as solidary in effect: for Hertz saw the annual rite as not merely cohesive, but as cohesive and divisive in different ways at the same time. Mauss, however, has nothing to say on this point.

Hertz’s work became well known in anglophone academia thanks to its promotion by Evans-Pritchard and, later, by Rodney Needham. As Evans-Pritchard (1973: ix) stated in his introduction to Needham’s handbook on the right and the left:

here I may be allowed to take a bit of credit to myself, for what Hertz wrote seems, except here and there, to have been forgotten—I suppose totally passed by in the English-speaking world—until I brought him into circulation again... I included a lecture on Hertz every year at Oxford during my entire tenure of the Chair of Social Anthropology at that University.5

Both Evans-Pritchard and Needham were mainly interested in Hertz because of his symbolic approach to the comparative study of collective representations. To Needham, who was then propounding his own version of structuralism, ‘The Pre-Eminence of the Right Hand’ was primarily a paper about asymmetric dualism, in which Hertz contended that polarity is a fundamental aspect of human expression (Needham 1979: 296).

According to Evans-Pritchard (1960: 16), the essay on St Besse was an attempt to relate certain features of the cult and its attendant myths to local and politico-ecclesiastical organization. In contrast, Needham, who was then primarily interested in rather formalist studies of a structuralist bent and in the isolation of natural symbols, thought Hertz’s deepest concern was not with the politicking over the possession of St Besse but with ‘the ancient, fundamental belief which sees in certain rocks the seat and hearth of a divine force’. On this reading ‘St Besse’ was but a precursor to another paper of Hertz’s, one on Athena and the cult of rocks. Needham planned to publish translations of the pair as a volume. But when Lévi-Strauss, after a thorough search, failed to find the Athena paper (which had very likely been destroyed by the German troops who ransacked Mauss’s apartment), Needham gave up the idea.

In consequence, while ‘Death and The Right Hand’ was read, debated, and written about, ‘St Besse’ was rarely mentioned. Unlike so much of the work of the Année Sociologique which was translated by students of Evans-Pritchard in the 1950s and 1960s, ‘St Besse’ was not put into English until the 1980s. Moreover, when it was finally published, its editor was not an Oxford-trained anthropologist, but a Cambridge-based social scientist who, in effect, buried the paper within a

5. Louis Dumont claims that until he had been appointed, in 1952, to the lectureship in Indian Sociology at Oxford, Evans-Pritchard knew nothing of Hertz and did not even know that the library of his department held a copy of the French edition of Hertz’s collected papers (Dumont 1986: 225 n.14).
collection on religious sociology, folklore, and history, where it is probably a cause of great surprise to any anthropologist who chances upon it.

It is not, perhaps, surprising that Victor Turner makes no reference to Hertz. As a disciple of Max Gluckman and sometime lecturer in his Manchester department, he did not count the members of the Année Sociologique among his influences. Most probably, he had never even heard of 'St Besse'.

If it is not by chance that certain articles are successfully revived, then nor—very probably—is it by chance that most contributions to academic journals are allowed to yellow on the shelf. The splendour of 'St Besse' is unsung because it did not fit neatly within the intellectual co-ordinates of inter-war French ethnology or of post-war Oxford anthropology: Mauss saw it as but a 'delightful' form of 'pastime' from the hard stuff—a comparative account of sin; Evans-Pritchard and Needham both liked it but neither ever gave lectures on it nor discussed it at length in print.

Of course, this disregard of a brilliant paper is a great pity. Maybe it is even more than that, for its neglect has meant that Hertz's implicit but still incisive criticism of Durkheim's approach to ritual has gone unrecognized, his (for its time) revolutionary analysis of the relations between political organization and symbolic interpretation has been unappreciated, and his genuinely pioneering fieldwork on pilgrimage has been ignored. What testimony to the confining power of the intellectual co-ordinates of one's time!

REFERENCES


