

COMMENTARY

I

THERE IS AN ALBATROSS IN THE SKY

'Fitting patients' conditions into pet theoretical frameworks' is an accusation often levelled at psychiatrists. If there is any truth in this, then at least one explanation can be found in the condition of psychiatry itself. Whereas the practitioner of 'physical' medicine has many hundreds of named diagnostic choices, the scant resources of psychiatrists allow them little more than a dozen or so labels on which to draw:¹ thus 'schizophrenia', for instance, perforce becomes a blanket term covering many variations. At the same time, there are elements of mental disorder, or symptoms, that may run as strands through more than one of those conditions which have at present received labels, and so we see 'depression' occurring in 'schizophrenia', 'manic depression', 'hyper-active mania', and so on. Given the permeation of some symptoms and the few labels from which to choose, it is no wonder that a psychiatrist may be tempted to use the label he knows best.

My concern here with psychiatry is simply in the analogy it provides, near enough apt, for a similar problem facing social

¹ There are conflicting opinions on precise numbers since it depends considerably on which approach to classification is made. Nevertheless, the general comparison holds good. For example, Houston, Joiner and Trounce (*A Short Textbook on Medicine*, Hodder and Stoughton) list over 1,000 physiological conditions as against 22 to 34 psychiatric disorders (and one should note that the gap is likely to widen in a more comprehensive textbook).

anthropologists with their theories. Furthermore, just as it is in the nature of mental processes to be inter-connected and interactive so too is it in the nature of social processes.

In our discipline, social anthropology, no major insights or intensely illuminating new theories have occurred during the last decade or more. We are in the doldrums, without a fresh wind to take us on beyond where we have already reached. Our current discoveries are minor: a view of the other side of a piece of flotsam which has turned over in the night, the rate at which weevils eat ship's biscuits, and so forth. We haul up the mainsail directly a small thermal plays a passing cat's-paw on the water, and then with nothing more to do than haul it down again, and no ensuing hope, are prone to vent our irate attention on colleagues in the same boat. The only things we have to occupy us are the minutiae.

In such a situation, where desperation is likely to prevail, the social anthropologist may well fall to the same temptation open to psychiatrists. Ironically enough, the whole syndrome also has a flavour of the comments made by some social anthropologists in the past on a so-called 'primitive mentality' when they proposed that deficiency in wide areas of knowledge generated a compulsive desire to fill the void at all costs by 'imaginative' processes. I say only 'a flavour' especially since the word 'imaginative' would not apply in all its senses to the problem we examine.

In order to illustrate what I have said, let me take a short article written by Roy Willis called 'Seeing Africa' (*RAIN*, No.45, August 1981). I have particularly selected this article in an attempt to avoid accusations that I, too, am turning a morbid attention on colleagues. I admire Roy Willis, know him well and where he sometimes parks his tongue. In my opinion, therefore, and albeit he has utilized a different approach, his purpose is probably the same as mine and his expectation is that its message will be developed. For those who recognise that I am 'in the same boat' and see me as still not heeding my own warning in regard to other aspects, I would borrow and adapt from Bertrand Russell and seek refuge in a claim that the critical analysis of a problem is not of the same order as the problem itself.

In his article, Roy Willis describes a custom wherein at the end of an official dinner 'the senior man present would propose to his male fellow-diners that they "see Africa". This invitation was the signal for all to take temporary leave of their female consorts, go out into their host's back garden and empty their bladders.' He ascribes the custom to British administrators of colonial East Africa, and later goes on to a structural analysis, 'in the classic Lévi-Straussian manner', of analogically associated dualities such as 'inside and outside'.

Before considering the major point, whether these dualities are applicable, let us see if in any case this example offers a platform steady enough on which to operate the

fine cuts of such an analysis. In the first place, the ethnography itself is open to objection. The custom was by no means confined to colonial administrators but was widespread among Europeans of all occupations, and I have even heard *exact* translations of the same expression in Kiswahili on several occasions, used by indigenous Africans in the same context. Instances of similar euphemisms used by Africans are too profuse in my memory to enumerate. An analysis of 'light' (as 'symbolizing the culture of European, and particularly English civilization') and 'dark' (as 'symbolizing the colonized') consequently becomes less tenable, though not completely defenceless since Roy Willis could still claim that the custom had achieved ritualistic significance among colonial officials. Nevertheless, the platform begins to shake.

Again, where Roy Willis proposes that there was a tendency for the men to line up outside according to rank, thus imaging the actual structure of colonial administration, there is a further ethnographic objection. I have taken part in the custom of 'seeing Africa' many hundreds of times and would hesitate to state categorically whether it was some sort of ranking order or just haphazard placement which occurred most frequently when colonial officials were involved. My recollection, indeed, inclines towards a bias in favour of 'haphazard placement', but at least there is room to doubt if the frequency of 'ranking order' is numerically significant. When order did occur, it is perhaps illuminating that it was usually only a semblance and seldom strict. Surely, this is a pointer towards a more readily acceptable explanation in terms of an entirely distinct custom prevalent throughout the officialdom of Britain and many other countries - the protocol of exit by seniority through the door of a room? The order of exit might well condition the order of final arrival outside, in which case the cause must lie properly with the protocol, and analysis improperly with 'seeing Africa'. Comparative absence of 'ranking order' when officials were not involved tends to reinforce my argument. The platform shakes even more.

Should Roy Willis wish to imply that this custom was exported from Britain to Africa, by attributing it to white, English-speaking, officials, let me say immediately that this cannot be. Otherwise, with Britain's vast colonial experience, we could expect equally large-scale incidences in similar terminology reported from around the globe, such as 'seeing India', 'seeing America', and so on. Undoubtedly the action of relief on an ever-hungry earth has been practised in most of these places (there is even much evidence of indigenous Africans sallying forth from their homes for this purpose), and there are many euphemisms for the practice, in many languages, floating from the urgent lips of people round the world. Is 'seeing Africa' consequently just a geographic variation, or is there some deeper meaning in the usage of this particular euphemism?

We have already seen that Africans themselves frequently use similar expressions, and even indeed exact translations on

occasion, so it does not seem likely at the outset that there will be any significance beyond its geographic reference. However, in order to remove doubt further, the status of euphemisms themselves in this context should be examined. Other than 'urinal' which covers only one bodily function, I have had great difficulty in tracing any term in the English language (and some others) which is not euphemistic, and so far have discovered none that specifically describes a place where both bodily functions may be exercised. It may be that in the beginning, before man began to congregate in towns and was forced to manufacture methods of disposal, 'outside', or something similar, conveniently constituted an automatic euphemism and simultaneously a sufficient description of a place for the performance of both bodily functions. The evolution of pertinent etiquette then continued in the same vein. But this is conjecture. Nevertheless, it remains that specific terms do not come easily to mind, and/or are considered socially impolite, and that consequently euphemisms are commonplace. 'Seeing Africa' is located squarely in this genre, and so is probably no more than just another variation, chosen for its apt regional reference. In this light, the strong indications are that 'euphemism' is a diagnosis simpler and also more likely to be correct than 'symbolism'. The platform now starts to disintegrate.

It may well be that the original use of the expression 'seeing Africa', coined or borrowed, came about in the white community through a combination of pragmatism and politeness. A number of men and women celebrating dinner together, and a tropical climate encouraging the intake of a large quantity of liquid; a compulsive biological function to consider; no withdrawing room for the ladies and but a single lavatory in, or near, the house: taken in conjunction, these pose a practical problem. What better solution than that the men should remove to the countryside? The phrase itself, 'seeing Africa', could not be construed as offensive to delicate ears, and ladies were spared embarrassment from verbal offers to allow them to go first, with an implication that the weakness of their sex extended to their bladders (the offer itself would have constituted a conflict of mores). Moreover, the men were more structurally suited to utilize the facility of a dark, snake-ridden, outdoors ('a handy gadget at a picnic' as I believe it has been described). Furthermore it promoted social harmony, for whatever Roy Willis has to say about men standing side-by-side according to hierarchy, it obviated the worse problem of males having to queue, with all that might entail in the choice of criteria for the order of priority - whether by age, professional seniority, social seniority, sheer need, or overt physical domination.

There is no denying that what may start as a solution to a practical problem can later develop ritualistic tendencies, but to impute symbolic causes to every aspect of this particular custom seems to me more like stretching a theory to fit an

obsession than a realistic analysis. 'Inside and outside'? Given the circumstances and the expedient solution, where else could males go but outside?

Moreover, in his application of analogically associated dualities, how does Roy Willis account for the recalcitrant evidence provided by many thousands of instances in Africa and across the world of females using outside lavatories, or even 'mother earth' when males are not around? Are we to explain this away glibly by 'role reversal'? If so, social anthropological theory treads the path towards becoming a religion.

The desperate theoretician, but not the purist, might argue that there were alternatives to going outside - the carpet for example. In that case he would have to overcome countervailing arguments such as hygiene, material damage, and social constraints. If there is no reasonable alternative to an action, how can we say that the action is governed by symbolism or cosmological values (or, possibly, even evokes them)? If it is not actually *governed* by these factors, then the most we can say is that by chance practical necessity and belief systems happily coincide. But would the last help us in understanding a society? If we cannot surely, and honestly, abstract such values from a social situation, then it follows usually that we are already aware of these values in order to apply them. Once again, danger attends such a path: temptation calls insidiously towards the bear-pit of favoured-label-sticking, and the brink crumbles easily.

All this, of course, is quite different from explaining in terms of cosmological values why a society follows one out of a number of choices. Where there is no choice, then surely that in itself is sufficient explanation? Desperation must not condition any of us into making everything conform to how we want it. The social anthropologist, ubiquitous and predatory as a jackal, and equally prone to poke his nose in domestic garbage bins, should not be surprised when he finds rubbish wrapped in banana leaves rather than supermarket paper-bags. Supermarket paper-bags are not ubiquitous.

There are other details in the article by Roy Willis which are open to challenge, but enough has been said, I think, to illustrate my argument, make the point, and leave Roy Willis in peace.

As I claimed earlier, we are in the doldrums, and doldrums are noted for generating psychological problems. The irony of it all would be if our despair led some of us into the laps of those selfsame psychiatrists where the diagnostic capabilities of one could suffer from the same disorder as the malaise present in the other. It might add a strange dimension to the term 'homeopathy' - and thus continue the chain of bending theories to fit obsessions.