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Introduction

THE WORLD-HISTORICAL CULTURAL REVOLUTION

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF the Christian evangelization of the Fiji Islands, when an admiring chief said to the English missionary, “Your ships are true, your guns are true, so your god must be true,” he didn’t mean what the current average social scientist would understand him to mean: that the notion of “god,” as of “religion” in general, is a reflex of the real-political order, a functional ideology designed to legitimate the secular powers that be. In that case, the apparent acknowledgment of the English god’s existence would be an expression, in the form of a religious imaginary, of the material force of the guns and ships. But the chief was saying something of the opposite, that the English ships and guns were material expressions of the god’s power—*mana* is the Fijian term—to which the foreigners evidently had some privileged access. The Fijian for “true” (*dina*) is a predicate of *mana*, as in the common envoi of ritual speech “*mana*, it is true.” What the chief said is that, as divinely endowed with *mana*, the English ships and guns were realizations of the potency of the English god.

The incident epitomizes the larger context and continuing motivation of this work: the radical transformation in cultural order that began some 2,500 years ago—in the “Axial Age,” as the German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers dubbed it in 1953—and is still unfolding on a global scale (Jaspers 1953). The distinctive civilizations that spread

from their origins in Greece, the Near East, Northern India, and China between the eighth and third century BCE introduced a still-ongoing cultural revolution of world-historical proportions. The essential change was the translation of divinity from an *immanent* presence in human activity to a *transcendental* “other world” of its own reality, leaving the earth alone to humans, now free to create their own institutions by their own means and lights.

Until they are transformed by the colonial transmissions of the axial ideologies, Christianity notably, peoples (that is, most of humanity) are surrounded by a host of spiritual beings—gods, ancestors, the indwelling souls of plants and animals, and others. These lesser and greater gods effectively create human culture; they are immanent in human existence, and for better or worse determined human fate, even unto life and death. Although generally called “spirits,” these beings themselves have the essential attributes of persons, a core of the same mental, temperamental, and volitional capacities. Accordingly, they are often designated in these pages as “metapersons” or “metahumans,” and when alternatively referred to as “spirits,” it is always explicitly or implicitly under quotation marks, given their quality as nonhuman persons. (Similarly the term “religion” is inappropriate where these metahuman beings and forces are intrinsic in and a precondition of all human activity, not a transcendent afterthought.) By this same quality, they interact with human persons to form one big society of cosmic dimensions—of which humans are a small and dependent part.

This dependent position in a universe of more powerful metahuman beings has been the condition of humanity for the greater part of its history and the majority of its societies. All the world before and around the axial civilizations was a zone of immanence. Here the myriad metahuman powers were not only present in people’s experience, they were the decisive agents of human weal and woe—the sources of their success, or lack thereof, in all variety of endeavors from agriculture and hunting, to sexual reproduction and political ambition. As the early modern historian of religious encounter Alan Strathern (2019) puts the matter in an illuminating recent work on the transformation of what common social science called the passage from “immanentism” to “transcendentalism,”

the “basic immanentist assumption is that the capacity to achieve any worthwhile objective is dependent on the approval or intervention of supernatural forces and metapersons. These constitute the fundamental origin of the ability to produce food, survive ill health, become wealthy, give birth, and wage war” (36–37). We begin to see what is at stake, institutionally and structurally, in the immanentist/transcendentalist divide. With apologies to all the human scientists, Marxists, Durkheimians, and others implicitly grounded in the assumptions of a transcendentalist world, the immanentist cultures were subject to “determination by the religious basis”—that is, until divinity went from an immanent infrastructure to a transcendent superstructure.

It probably goes without saying, but I had better say it anyway: what is at issue is how the immanentist societies are actually organized and function in their own cultural terms, their own concepts of what there is, and not as matters “really are” in our native scheme of things. It will become all too evident that our own transcendentalist notions, insofar as they have been embedded in common ethnographic vocabularies, have disfigured the immanentist cultures they purport to describe. Take the familiar distinction between the “spiritual” and the “material,” for example: it is not pertinent in societies that know all sorts of so-called “things”—often everything there is—as animated by indwelling spirit-persons. That this difference makes a fundamental difference of cultural order is the point of the book. What passes for an “economics” or a “politics” embedded in an enchanted universe is radically different from the concepts and stratagems that people are free to pursue when the gods are far away and not directly involved. In immanentist orders, the ritual invocation of spirit-beings and their powers is the customary prerequisite of all varieties of cultural practice. Compounded with the human techniques of livelihood, reproduction, social order, and political authority as the necessary condition of their efficacy, the cosmic host of beings and forces comprise an all-around substrate of human action. The multitude of spirit-persons is synthesized with social action like an element in a chemical compound, or a bound morpheme in a natural language. Or as Lévy-Bruhl said of certain New Guinea peoples, “nothing is undertaken without having recourse to enchantments” (1923, 308–9).

The famous Weberian characterization of modernity as the disenchantment of the world is a later echo of the transcendentalism developed in Karl Jasper's "Axial Age" and the large cottage industry of scholarly commentary that followed. The consensus remains today as sinologist Benjamin Schwartz expressed it early on: "If there is nevertheless some common underlying impulse in all these 'axial' movements, it might be called the strain toward transcendence" (1975, 3). The Dutch orientalist Henri Frankfort's reference to the "austere transcendentalism" of the ancient Hebrew God comes close to an ideal-typical description: "The absolute transcendence of God is the foundation of Hebrew religious thought." He is "ineffable, transcending every phenomenon" ([1948] 1978, 343). The spirits having left, humans now inherited an earth that had become a subjectless "nature." The effect was a veritable cultural revolution; or, as Israeli sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt says, a series of revolutions that "have to do with the emergence, conceptualization, and institution-alization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders" (1986, 1).

This sense of a recurring process fits better with the persistence of immanent elements in all such transcendental regimes. Immanence continues in many forms, from "folk beliefs" in hinterland regions, or descents of divinity from heaven to earth in saintly apparitions and miraculous interventions, to ascents of humanity from earth to heaven in shamanistic séances and prophetic aspirations. Thus transcendentalism had a hard time shrugging off its immanentist heritage, as in the *Confessions* of the fourth-century CE theologian Augustine, at the end of the Axial Age.

The good Bishop more or less unconsciously preserved an all-around animism in a world bereft of God. Notwithstanding Augustine's insistence that God made the earthly world of Nothing, he was still able to have an interesting conversation with the earth, the sea, "living creeping things," "the moving air," "the whole air with all its inhabitants," the heavens, sun, moon, and stars, all of whom he asked if they were God, and they told him they were not He. Said the creeping things, "We are not thy God, seek above us." Likewise, the heavenly bodies denied they were "the God whom thou seekest." So, says Augustine in response,

“unto all the things which encompass the door of my flesh, ‘Ye have told me of my God, that ye are not he; tell me something of Him.’ And they cried out with a loud voice, ‘He made us’” (*Confessions* 10.6). Thus in vain did Augustine search for a transcendent God in a universe populated by the immanent persons-of-things.

There are still faith healers and witches in our midst—even some, like Augustine, pure animists. Before I had completed this introductory chapter, the *New York Times*, citing a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center, reported that “60 percent of Americans believe one or more of the following: psychics, astrology, the presence of spiritual energy in inanimate objects (like mountains or trees), or reincarnation” (Bennett 2019). Yet for all the rear-guard resistance of immanentism, the evacuation of the high gods from the earthly city has effectively put the culture under human control. Certainly, the critical sectors of economy and polity are clear of divinity (even if, as we shall see, immanentist language of enspirited metapersons is still pervasive). The modern “free market economy,” for example: insofar as it is self-regulating by supply and demand, it is in principle motivated by the economizing projects of its individual human agents. As for politics, it is symptomatic of who’s in charge that American presidents piously intone the ritual formula, “God bless the United States of America” only after they have told the Deity what they are going to do. Melanesian big-men, Polynesian chiefs, or Inca emperors would have to do that beforehand—the god, as empowering agent, being the condition of the political possibility.

Just so, the revolution initiated by the human takeover of the culture eventually produced a total reordering of the immanentist universe, eventually creating the differentiated and transcendent spheres of “religion,” “politics,” “science,” and “economy.” These abstract categories made their appearance over the course of the early modern period, between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment. In what essentially could be called a “Second Axial Age,” Western civilization produced a series of transcendent categories, each a differentiated formation, an autonomous domain that articulated with the others metaphorically and functionally. The category of “religion” itself, the origin of which the biblical scholar Jack Miles (2019, 28–29) identifies in the Christian conversion of Roman

pagans, was critically refashioned, reborn in the confessional strife wrought by Luther and others during the Protestant Reformation. “Politics” appeared in a schism with “religion,” as in Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1988 [1532]); “science” took shape, along with “nature” itself, as a differentiated set of laws that explained movement in the heavens and on earth (Newton [1687] 2016), and with the radical distinction of a knowing “subject” and an external “object” (Descartes [1641] 1996); “economy” (or “political economy”) appeared in the work of Adam Smith ([1776] 1976) and later with Thomas Malthus ([1798] 2015) and David Ricardo ([1817] 2004). The expansion of Europe and the encounter with immanentist societies during the early modern period helped constitute “culture” as its own autonomous sphere. The genius of Giambattista Vico, author of *The New Science* ([1744] 1968), was to supply, in a transcendent fashion, an immanentist perspective that made it possible to write a science of “cultures” in their own terms, however incomplete.

Note that compared to the cultures of immanence, religion since the sixteenth century has migrated from the infrastructure to the superstructure, making it possible for “determination by the economic basis” to become the normal science of scholars ranging from traditional historical materialists to neoliberal economists—not to mention the rest of us. There is hardly any other indigenous Western anthropology. By indigenous anthropology, I mean the effect of the transcendental revolution on common average thought that envisions a categorical layer cake with economics as the foundation, topped by social relations that conform to it, a political system that upholds it, and finally a religious or ideological layer that reinforces and legitimates the totality. This idea of “culture” becomes the inverse of the immanentist structure, where the gods are the creators of culture as well as the source of power by which it is realized—thus putting together on their heads Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Milton Friedman, among others.

Also specifically transcendental, and as much taken for granted, is a suite of familiar binary oppositions of ontological proportions: not only between the spiritual and the material (or spiritual and secular), but also between natural and supernatural, and people and spirits. In immanent regimes all significant material “things” are enspirited inasmuch as they

embody animating powers with characteristics of persons. Hence the so-called supernatural is not distinguished from what we call the “natural,” even as people are spirits.

Not that the axial civilization literature has been too enlightening on what the transition from immanentism to transcendentalism actually entails. Some axiologists are tempted to suppose a priori that whatever they take to be the salient characteristics of the axial civilizations, the pre- and non-axial societies must be characterized by the opposite. So, for example, since the axial religions distinctively focus on the ethical behavior and life-after-death of the individual—a kind of soteriological or salvation-driven individualism—the immanentist societies are distinctively “social,” concerned with group prosperity in this world as opposed to individual salvation in the next (Taylor 2012). Even ignoring the common reports of individual competition for status, as among Melanesian big-men or Southeast Asian hill peoples, or the Amerindian vision quests that determine an adolescent’s lifelong fate, there is the universal practice of individual persons invoking the metaperson powers that be for success in hunting, agriculture, lovemaking, war, curing, birthing, trading, esoteric knowledge, or whatever else life-giving may be wanted. (In any case, rice-farming Iban of Borneo “compete not only to assert their equality—to prove themselves equal to others—but they also seek, if possible, to excel and so exceed others in material wealth, power and reputation” [Sather 1996, 74].) In this connection to the “divine,” it is difficult to imagine a more inappropriate label for the pre-axial condition than “mundane,” which so many axial scholars favor. They have in mind apparently an opposition between heaven and earth, ignoring that this also entails one between the spiritual and secular—which would leave the “mundane” immanentist peoples bereft of the metaperson powers on whom their existence depends. For people living in an immanentist regime, where nothing is undertaken without enchantments, existence is anything but mundane.

In addition to Alan Strathern’s (2019) recent work on the subject, there have been some exemplary appreciations of the immanent-to-transcendental transition, though not necessarily by historians or sociologists in the mainstream of the axial scholarship. Political scientist

Benedict Anderson for one, writing independently of the axial literature on the transformation worked by Islam on traditional Javanese cosmologies. Anderson explicitly recognizes and effectively describes the dominance of an immanentist worldview even under the important pre-Islamic Indic kingdoms of Mataram, Kedhiri, and Majapahit. “Since Javanese cosmology made no sharp division between the terrestrial and the transcendental world,” he writes, “there was no extramundane referent by which to judge men’s actions” (Anderson 1990, 70). Here was a system with “divinity immanent in the world” (70), a “Power” endemic in the human habitat, even as it was concentrated in human society as the source of “fertility, prosperity, stability, and glory” (32). “Manifested in every aspect of the natural world,” the Power was present in “stones, trees, clouds, and fire, but [was] expressed quintessentially in the central mystery of life, the process of generation and regeneration.” In this way it provided the “basic link between the ‘animism’ of the Javanese villages, and the highly metaphysical pantheism of the urban centers (22).”

Enter then a “modernist Islamic cosmology” that reduces the immanentist sense of a Power suffusing the universe to “a divinity sharply separated from the works of His hand. Between God and man there is an immeasurable distance. . . . Thus power is, in a sense, removed from the world, since it lies with God, Who is not of this world, but above and antecedent to it. Furthermore, since the gulf between God and man is vast and God’s power is absolute, all men are seen as equally insignificant before His majesty” (Anderson 1990, 70). It is rather in the immanentist condition that humans can approach and even appropriate divinity—in acts of hubris that, as will be seen presently, construct a society in which people are not reduced to insignificance by an unreachable Deity but empowered by their differential relations to the godly beings all about them.

The beginnings of the liberation of human from divine authority is one of the themes of a remarkable article by the historian of late antiquity Peter Brown (1975) about the transcendental revolution, all the more remarkable because it was not about axial origins but the development of the High Middle Ages of Western Christendom in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The setting is testimony to the uneven development of transcendentalism, where a transcendent God abides over a human population on familiar terms with saints, ghosts, witches, and “nature spirits,” including monks, who were not technically human in so far as they lived the life of angels. As for angels, Peter Brown exemplifies “the intimacy and adjacency of the holy” in the early Middle Ages by the requirement that priests serving at the altar, if they needed to spit, had to do so on one side or behind them, “for at the altar the angels are standing.” The presence of “the non-human in the midst of a society,” Brown comments, “is available to all, for all purposes” (141).

In Canterbury Cathedral in the year 1050 it was possible to use the same pool of water, on the same day, to baptize an infant as a Christian and immerse an adult to solicit a divine verdict in a judicial case. Starting from the condition wherein “if ever there was an area where the sacred penetrated into the chinks of the profane and vice versa, it was in the ordeal” (135), Brown takes the subsequent fate of the ordeal as emblematic of the displacement of divinity from the earthly city in Latin Christianity. In 1205, the Lateran Council undermined the ordeal by forbidding the use of the liturgical blessing that had sanctioned such sacrilegious acts of “tempting God.” Finally, it was abandoned when it came under heavy clerical criticism as an ancient, vulgar, and lower-class custom that had only been tolerated for centuries “as a concession by the Church to the hard hearts of the Germanic barbarians” (136).

As is often told, beginning in the eleventh century, Western Europe experienced radical demographic and institutional changes, ranging from major increases in population and agricultural productivity to new forms of community, the revival of Roman law, heightened royal authority, the advent of chivalry, vernacular literature, the growth of cities, and much more. Not to neglect the new learning acquired from Arab and ancient Greek scholars: the latter, notably works of Aristotle, mainly transmitted through the former via Muslim Spain and Sicily.

The effect was a philosophical upheaval affecting a variety of institutional fields. “The methods of logical arrangement and analysis, and, still more, the habits of thought associated with the study of logic, penetrated the studies of law, politics, grammar, and rhetoric, to mention

only a few of the fields which were affected” (Southern 1953, 181–82). Of special interest for the present discussion is the potential impact of Aristotle’s *Categories* on an early medieval world in which the divine in various forms was still present and available to humankind. The *Categories*, the English medievalist R. W. Southern tells us, exercised an extraordinary fascination during the tenth and eleventh centuries. In principle, the nine Aristotelian categories could reconfigure the medieval ontology, inasmuch as Quantity, Quality, Relation, Position, Place, Time, State, Action, and Affection “were thought to exhaust the various ways in which any particular object can be regarded” (180). Note, however, that a fundamental category of the previous era is missing from Aristotle’s scheme of what can be said about any object: personhood is missing, the indwelling soul or person that autonomously animates any such thing. The new age of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as Brown notes, saw “the emergence of significantly new attitudes toward the universe. Though very different from any modern view, it was ‘modern’ in being no longer shot through with human reference. Previously, a thunderstorm had shown either the anger of God or the envy of demons, both directed at human beings” (1975, 141).

I am giving considerable space to Peter Brown’s study because his analysis of the post-axial transition to transcendence brilliantly exposes key characteristics of the immanentist condition, beginning with this issue of subject and object. As he observes, in the early Middle Ages, the intermingling of the sacred and the profane, in making nonhuman personhood an inner quality of material things, blurred the borderline between the objective and the subjective at every turn. “It was a strangely subjective objectivity” (Brown 1975, 142). Rather than a relation of persons to things, the human relation to the world was largely one of person-to-person. Otherwise put, rather than a sense of objectivity, it was a condition of intersubjectivity. By comparison, the structural changes of the twelfth century dramatically altered the relations between the subjective and the objective. As Brown describes the transformation, by ridding human activities of their subjective, supernatural sources, matters such as reasoning, law, and the exploitation of nature

take on “an opacity, an impersonal objectivity, and a value of their own which had been lacking in previous centuries” (144).

The point is well taken even if this was only a fundamental impulse of a transformation that remains to be completed. It speaks to a critical structural complement of the transcendental revolution: the emergence of humanized institutions once the divine is removed to an otherworldly reality. The human order becomes self-fashioning. “Political power was increasingly wielded without religious trappings. Government was what government did: rulers . . . settled down to exercise what real power they actually possessed” (135). Obviously, this was not accomplished completely by the twelfth century, but Peter Brown thus discovered the origins and impulses of a transcendentalism that remained to be completed in the early modern period and that was to revolutionize the practice of politics, including by Machiavelli, who justified the transcendentalist rupture by legitimating the autonomous sphere of the state.

Lastly, a word on anthropological methods. It should be clear enough that, though I have not always succeeded, I try to explicate the cultures at issue by their own immanentist premises—what used to be known as “the natives’ point of view” and sometimes now as “reverse anthropology” (e.g., Kirsch 2006). I try to unfold the peoples’ cultural practices by means of their own onto-logics. Implied is a criticism of a lot of received ethnography for a misleading conceptual apparatus composed of nearly equal parts of transcendentalist equivocation and colonialist condescension. The effect is an anthropology that disfigures both the discipline and the culture so described by maligning the people’s mentality as a mistaken sense of reality. Not that our fieldworkers are badly intentioned. On the contrary, the great majority are committed to the welfare of the people they study—virtually by vocation; it comes with the intellectual territory. But a too common effect of even the best work is to reduce the meaningful relations of a culture of immanence to the status of convenient fantasies of the objective reality—of a world actually without such gods—thus making their culture a fictional representation of ours.

Take the great New Zealand anthropologist Sir Raymond Firth, for example, as described by his almost equally great compatriot Edmund Leach: “The exceptional detail of Firth’s ethnographic material is a standing invitation for every reader to try to ‘rethink’ the particular explanations which Firth himself offers us” [1966, 21].) The corpus of Firth’s work beginning in the late 1920s on the Polynesian island of Tikopia is one of the great all-time achievements of anthropology. But by its explicit comments on Tikopian illusions of the presence of the gods in humans, canoes, temples, weapons, and tools—as the embodiments (*fakatino*) or vessels (*waka*) of the god, among similar expressions—Firth’s work is notable also for its repeated exposure of the islanders’ culture for what it really is—by our lights. The effect is to dissolve an immanentist world in a transcendentalist ontology.

Consider the contradictions of Firth’s description of an important rite having to do with net-fishing: “Then came the *symbolism* so characteristic of the Tikopia religion, the *fiction* that certain persons were for the time being deities in the flesh” (Firth 1967, 400; emphasis mine). The so-called symbolism concerned two women whose role was to carry the baskets that received the fish tributes due to two important goddesses named Pufine ma. As Firth continues: “When darkness fell the baskets were taken by two women, who went down to the beach and there personified the goddesses, receiving the tribute that was their due from the fisher-folk” (400). He then quotes a Tikopian on this characteristic “fiction”: “They have become Pufine ma there who have gone with their baskets” (400). Similarly, of a group of women preparing a sacred oven during the semiannual renewal rites, the Work of the Gods, “it is *believed* by the Tikopia that these women, while engaged in the sacred task, are *under the protection* of the Te Atua Fafine, the Female Deity, who is the tutelary genius of women” (142; emphasis mine). But in shifting from “believed” and “under the protection” of the goddess, Firth also says, “In fact, they are actually identified with her.” And in confirmation, Tikopia explain, “They who are doing the work there, it is she” (143). On other important ritual occasions, Firth had it from the god’s mouth to his ear. As the time when, by Firth’s description, the principal Tikopia chief “is believed to be the god in person,” and the chief

then explains to him, “I who have sat there am him [the god]. . . . I there am the god; he has come to sit in me” (1967, 157). All these identity-subtracting expressions—they are “believed” to be the goddesses; he is the “symbol” of the god, the “representation” of the god, “under the protection” of the god, and the like: all these are so many transcendental equivocations of simply, the god—“I who sit there am him” (cf. Hocart 1970, 74).

We need a considerable rectification of ethnographic terms. “Belief” is a prominent one. Wyatt MacGaffey (1986, 1) recalls Jean Pouillon’s *bon mot*, “It is only the nonbeliever who believes that the believer believes.” The ethnographic “believe” is often an ethnocentric reality-check on what the people actually *know*. The pioneering anthropologist of the Sudan Ian Cunnison so indicated many decades ago about East African Luapula people: “The important thing is this: what the Luapula peoples say now about the past is what they *know* actually happened in the past. Simply to say that they believe it happened in the past is too weak for they do not doubt it” (1959, 33; emphasis original). Anthropologists are prone to use the verb “to believe”—that the people “believe” in something—only when they don’t believe it themselves. Anthropologists don’t say, “The people believe curare poison kills monkeys”; but they will say, “The people believe the game father makes monkeys available for hunting.” Anthropologists don’t say, “The people believe that rain is needed for the crops to grow”; but they will say, “The people believe the gods make the rain” in New Guinea by urinating on them.

Another good candidate for oblivion is “myth,” referring to the narratives people regard as sacred truth and standard European languages thus devalue as fiction. The Polish-born pioneer ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1948, 85) oft-repeated “mythical charter” succeeds in rendering the constitutional doctrine of the clan or tribe unbelievable. Then there is all the folkling of indigenous peoples: their “folk medicine,” their “folk art,” their “folk biology”—the implication being that folk biology is to biology as military music is to music. Not to mention “folk music.”

The condescension is untenable. For all our self-fashioning in a natural world, we share the same existential predicament as those who solve

the problem by knowing the world as so many powerful others of their kind, with whom they might negotiate their fate. People are not the authors of their life and death, the forces of their propagation, growth and decline, their illness and their health, the plants and animals upon which they subsist, the weather upon which their prosperity depends. If people were such gods themselves, they would never want nor sicken, and they would never die. The common predicament is human finitude—which is what the next chapter is about.

This book should not be taken as an exercise in cultural comparison, however. It is a more or less disciplined attempt at generalization. Edmund Leach (1966) might have been the first to make that distinction between comparison and generalization, boldly devaluing the former as “butterfly collecting,” by contrast to the inspired guesswork that sees a similar pattern of relationships in a few disparate social systems, thus launching a possible universal proposition. To be fair, the cross-cultural comparison Leach criticized is hardly the only one possible, for all its apparent popularity in British Social Anthropology of the 1960s, notably among colleagues at Cambridge. Equipped with a priori analytic categories of social structure—“ethnocentric,” Leach calls them—such as “unilineal descent,” “complementary filiation,” “segmentary lineage systems,” and so on, anthropologists set out to discover them in various societies. Mainly in African societies, but also in the New Guinea Highlands, where Australian anthropologist J. A. Barnes (1962) notoriously demonstrated that African forms of lineage order didn’t exist. That precisely was Leach’s complaint. Such comparisons could only lead to a catalog of variations, an endless typology. Whereas, Leach argues, if one pays attention to the actual elements, the relations of correspondence and opposition, and so forth, in any system of kinship and marriage, any system, a definite pattern could be determined; to wit, “there is a fundamental ideological opposition between the relations which endow the individual with membership of a ‘we group’ of some kind (relations of incorporation), and those other relations which link ‘our group’ to other groups of like kind (relations of alliance), and that, in this dichotomy, relations of incorporation are distinguished symbolically as relations of common

substance, while relations of alliance are viewed as mystical influence” (Leach 1966, 21).

It is noteworthy that Leach based this finding on a mere handful of societies, different enough in culture and structure, but mainly just Trobriand Islanders, Tallensi, and Kachin, supplemented by Tikopia and Ashanti. Still, it has held up pretty well, at least for the “mystical influence” of affines, although, as will be discussed in a coming chapter, the pattern is generally more complex, both as regards substance and spiritual endowments. What is, however, wholly subscribed to throughout this book is Leach’s methodology of generalization: “Generalization is inductive; it consists in perceiving possible general laws in circumstances of particular cases; it is guesswork, a gamble, you may be wrong or you may be right, but if you happen to be right you have learnt something altogether new” (1966, 5; cf. Viveiros de Castro 2015, ch. 3).

Assuming Leach’s risks, this book addresses the configurations of immanence in radically different cultures that, despite all their experience of axial societies, remain today essentially cultures of immanence—which is to say most of humanity.

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