Leach, Edmund (1910–89)

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In an era when anthropologists, for better or worse, defined themselves as either functionalists or structuralists, Edmund Leach declared in 1975 that he had consistently been both at once. For him ethnography and introspection were the solid grounds for theoretical innovation. He developed his most creative insights by vigorously engaging in theoretical controversies and debates with his colleagues, both past and present. He rejected any suggestion that he had founded a school, but nonetheless he authored some of anthropology's most influential monographs of the 1950s and most inspiring essays of the 1960s. His work continues to inform and motivate current debates.

Edmund Ronald Leach was born in Lancashire, England, on November 7, 1910. He studied at Marlborough College and later read mathematics and mechanical science at Clare College, Cambridge, obtaining a BA degree in 1932. During the early 1930s, after four years working in business and administration in China, he returned to England to study social anthropology at the London School of Economics under Raymond Firth and Bronisław Malinowski. Malinowski's seminar was famous at the time and Leach was an active participant. While he was on an extended trip to Burma in 1939, World War II broke out. Leach prolonged his stay until 1945, serving as an officer in the Burmese Army. It was during this time that he gained an unparalleled ethnographic expertise of the Kachin, one of the hill populations of northern Burma. After receiving his PhD in 1947, he remained at the London School of Economics as a reader until 1953, when he returned to Cambridge. In Cambridge, he was first a lecturer and subsequently a reader; in 1972 he was appointed to a chair. During his career, his growing academic standing was recognized through numerous prizes and distinguished lectures, along with his service in high academic posts, culminating in a knighthood in 1975 and his election as a trustee of the British Museum.

A staunch defender of ethnography, even when proposing abstract models, Leach was inclined to seek similarities between different peoples rather than marveling at their distinctive traits. His interests were wide, beginning with his encounter with the Yami in the island of Botel Tobago, to whom he paid a short visit in the mid-1930s, and ending with an analysis of his own family's photographs. In between, he engaged in two prolonged periods of fieldwork in Burma (1940s) and Ceylon (1950s) and, from the 1960s on, experimented with different subjects related to Western cosmology. For instance, he examined the Bible as mythical material, comparing the idea of virgin birth among the Trobrianders and in Christian theology. He also analyzed English words of abuse and compared them with their Kachin counterparts. He provided a novel analysis of Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel. The topics he touched upon during his career included, among others, kinship and social organization;

Figure 1   Edmund Leach.
Source: © RAI.

land tenure and peasant economy; myth and ritual; binary thought and liminality; information theory, semiotics, and symbolic communication; art and aesthetics; structural–functional method and the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss; biblical materials and the myths of classical Greece.

His probing of areas outside the main concerns of classical anthropology provided an affirmation that anthropological styles of analysis could always be tested on different materials, whether these were distant or close to the analyst, and that they were best applied when they were developed through debates with predecessors and contemporaries. In this way, he was constantly examining and questioning anthropology's scope and limits. Leach observed that the kind of reasoning common to the humanities frequently appeared to be circular but was, in fact, dialectical. "You are not just back where you started. You have moved on a bit, or you have moved somewhere else," he asserted in an interview (cited in Kuper 1986, 380).

Given his temperament for being both flexible and adamant in pursuing theoretical arguments, Leach argued with and learned from his colleagues. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) was the leading adversary in *Political Systems of Highland Burma,* Leach's classic monograph (Leach 1954). For Leach, the Kachins' unstable and dynamic political system was far from the classic model of societies as organic and integrated systems existing in functional equilibrium, as Radcliffe-Brown would have it. The disagreement continued with Radcliffe-Brown's former student Meyer Fortes (1906–83) in Leach's second monograph, *Pul Eliya: A Village in Ceylon*, in which, refusing to consider kinship "as a thing in itself," he argued that locality (rather

than descent) could form the basis of corporate groups (Leach 1961, 146, 305). At various points in Leach's writings, Raymond Firth (1901–2002) was mentioned as a positive influence, who gave him confidence that a dynamic vision of social processes and the inconsistencies generated by choice and individual action were principal elements in social life. Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942) was one of Leach's major influences. Although Leach was fiercely critical of the functionalist dogma that was widespread at the beginning of his career, by 1977 he considered Malinowski "the greatest and most original of all social anthropologists" (cited in Tambiah 1989, 311). During the 1960s Leach was especially receptive to Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1908–2009) structuralism, in part owing to his prior training in mathematics, but he later criticized structuralism's disregard for the empirical behavior of individuals. Leach mostly approved of Lévi-Strauss's idea of *sauvage* as the order of human, "undomesticated" categories such as in myth, art, and totemism, thus overcoming the idea of exoticism for the promise of a horizontal approach to diversity (Leach 1968, 1).

While structuralism's emphasis on myths led directly to speculations about the character of the human mind, Leach's focus on ritual revealed a fundamental dimension of his theoretical orientation, which always advocated the combination of thought and action. Ritual is not seen as a counterpoint to belief systems; instead, myths and rituals say equivalent things and must be observed in action. Of the three types of behavior Leach contemplates, the "rational–technical" is directed toward specific ends by our standards of verification; "communicative" behavior follows a culturally defined code; and "magical" behavior is potent in itself but not in a rational–technical sense. The term "ritual" embraces all except the first case.

His last conference paper, delivered in 1986 and published posthumously, stands as testimony to Leach's widening scope of anthropological interpretation. In "Masquerade," examining the topic of ancestor worship, Leach (1990) makes a final statement by aligning himself with Malinowski instead of Lévi-Strauss. He analyzes a series of nineteenth-century portraits of his own family as well as a few ethnographic group portraits, in particular inserting some of Malinowski standing in the midst of the Trobrianders. Disregarding the distinction between history and myth that was dear to Lévi-Strauss, he names as his own ancestral *deities* a great uncle, Henry Howorth, the author of a five-volume history of the Mongols, and Malinowski himself. The conference displayed many of Leach's lasting lessons: that there are no predetermined limits to anthropological inquiry; that anthropology is as much about "us" as about "them"; that to engage with predecessors is a productive path to greater insight; and that theory is not separable from ethnography.

SEE ALSO: Alliance Theory (Marriage Systems); Conception Beliefs; Ethnography; Firth, Raymond (1901–2002); Fortes, Meyer (1906–83); Functionalism; Gell, Alfred (1945–97); Gender and Kinship; Goody, Jack (1919–2015); Interviews with Eminent Anthropologists: An Online Resource; Judaism; Kinship Systems; Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1908–2009); Malinowski, Bronisław (1884–1942); Marxism; Militarized Anthropology, Controversy and Resistance to; NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990); Norway, Anthropology in; Radcliffe-Brown,

A. R. (1881–1955); Ritual; Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI); Sacred Time; Social and Cultural Anthropology; Structural Functionalism; Totemism; United Kingdom, Anthropology in; Van Gennep, Arnold (1873–1957)

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