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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Reimar Schefold, *Lia; Das grosse Ritual auf den Mentawai Inseln*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1988. 694 pp.; ill.

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Professor Schefold's description and analysis of Mentawai religion, felicitously combining broad scholarship with the results of thorough fieldwork, is more than just another specimen of good ethnographic work. It has human significance. Living in close contact with a small and isolated group of simple horticulturalists, the author was able through meticulous observation to explore the basic needs and drives motivating human behaviour when and where man is left to his own devices, thrown back on his own resources. Schefold's report on this aspect of his experiences called for a voluminous book, which he divided into seven parts.

In the introductory part (covering some forty-odd pages) the author discusses the theoretical implications of the aim of his fieldwork: unearthing the meaning which the Mentaweians' elaborate ritual has to the performers themselves. Then follows a critical discussion of the available literature, and part I ends with a concise account of the place and the course of the fieldwork conducted. This involved an initial period of almost two years' residence on the island of Siberut, the biggest and northernmost of the Mentawai Islands, a small archipelago in the Indian Ocean some 90 miles west of Central Sumatra. The better part of this period was passed among the Sakuddei, a group (*uma*) of some 35 souls, women and children included. In later years three short re-visits followed.

Part II (230 pp.) starts with a general description of the thinly populated island, followed by a discussion of the prehistory of the Mentaweians and the differences between their culture and the pattern of culture of the Indonesians living on the main islands. A detailed review of Mentawean ethnography follows this: their material culture and economy, their social organization, and their religious concepts and specialists are discussed. Special attention is given to the absence of any form of social organization beyond the *uma*, the small patrilineage rarely counting more than 60 individuals, and usually far fewer. Their communal house (also called *uma*) is the centre of their ritual activities. Here the members of the *uma*,

normally living dispersed in garden houses, congregate for a little under a month once, and often twice a year to celebrate their *pulijajat*, a series of ceremonies aimed at restoring harmony — harmony with nature, with the outer world, and among themselves. Such rituals are called for every time there are signs of disharmony. Such signs forebode sickness and death, and the Mentaweians have good reason to fear them. In spite of favourable economic conditions (they enjoy a relative abundance of food) and the absence of tribal wars, there is no population growth, sickness taking a heavy toll among them. Child mortality is especially high.

Parts III and IV (200 pp.) present a detailed description of the *pulijajat* ritual, together with a literal transcription of the texts of all the various incantations and spells. Their meaning, along with that of the action of the successive rites and ceremonies, is analysed in part V (130 pp.), while parts VI and VII (together coming to some thirty pages) are devoted to the reactions of old-fashioned and modern participants to the changing conditions today, and to some concluding remarks, i.e. on the nature of primitive man, respectively. Schefold's attention to detail, together with his intimate association with one of his neighbours, the leader of the *uma* into which he found himself adopted, have opened up a world of wonder in which everything, living or dead, has a soul and consequently can be addressed in speech. What we would call magic here takes the form of a one-sided conversation in which the souls of selected plants and animals are persuaded to act as intermediaries with the ancestors, spirits and other souls whose benevolent cooperation is required to deliver man from his various predicaments. A close intimacy, founded on feelings of togetherness and partnership with the surrounding world, is the basic condition for this perception of things. It can only achieve such a pronounced form where man is living in direct, personal contact with his surroundings, and primarily with nature. Such contact develops where man, often alone, finds himself enveloped in the uninterrupted silence of a mysterious nature, where the sounds which the forest emits — the voices of animals and birds — accentuate its basic silence and mystery, rather than detracting from these qualities. In such an eternal silence man feels himself addressed. Addressed, of course, by his own subconscious, though he does not necessarily know this. All he knows is that this mysterious world is an animate world and that it invites a response from him — a response readily given by crediting that world with the hidden presence of ancestors, spirits and souls.

A point not discussed by Schefold is that this world of spiritual beings displays a remarkable lack of individuation. He mentions various categories of spirits (ancestors, souls, spirits of the forest, etc.), but the only spirit which acquires concrete form in a myth is the earthquake demon. Schefold has reserved his collection of Mentawai myths for later publication. For the time being, the assumption seems justified that Mentawai mythology is not very highly developed. An explanation for this may be (but I hope

Schefold will correct me if I am wrong) that the Mentawai people have rare opportunities for sharing mystic experiences. Each *uma* performs its rituals in isolation. *Uma* do not ignore the existence of other *uma* (these may be asked for assistance in the earliest phases of the *pulijajat*, or may be surprised with presents of cooked food towards the end of it), but in principle each *uma* concentrates on the intimacy of its isolated existence apart from other groups. Here alone the perfect harmony and partnership which the Mentawai people seek may be realized.

There is nothing exceptional in this quest for partnership. Elsewhere I have argued that man, with his amazing gift for linguistic communication, and as the only creature capable of (and prepared for) sexual activity all the year round, is conditioned to seek partnership. He nevertheless always fails in this. Man is also an ego, a subject, as I termed it in my *Man's Quest for Partnership*, and as such is always in opposition to his world, trying to subjugate it to the private views and desires which the ego has assimilated and identified with in the course of growing up. This is what happens to us; it is also what happens to the Mentawaians, and they are well aware of it. Schefold leaves no doubt on this point. They are aware that they are disturbing the harmony with nature when they are preparing and weeding their fields, and that they are spoiling the relations with fellow-communities through mistrust and dubious transactions. They realize that their exertions to restore harmony with the performance of a big *pulijajat* quickly come to naught again because they cannot help disturbing this harmony again soon after completion of their rites. They are better aware of all this than they — and Schefold with them — care to admit. Their representations of the dead are relevant in this respect. The souls of the dead are believed to depart to the big village of the dead, where they live on as ancestors, benevolent beings who every now and then are implored to return to the *uma* to deliver their progeny from their predicaments. Their corpses, of course, stay behind, and these corpses, like every other thing in this world, have a soul — in their case a malevolent soul. It sneaks into the communal house, where it may cause all sorts of mischief. One of the first acts on the occasion of a *pulijajat* is the chasing of the souls, the *pitto'*, from the *uma*. It is rather naive to regard the *pitto'* and their misdoings as simply a consequence of the belief that all things have a soul, and to leave it at that.

The attention paid to the *pitto'* in ritual and the exertions deemed necessary to get rid of them bear testimony to the importance of the belief in *pitto'*. It implies the silent avowal that man is an ambiguous being: outwardly given to loving care for the community's wellbeing, secretly a jealous egoist out to do harm to the surviving fellow-members of his *uma*. Apparently, even the friendly Mentawaians have an inkling that the human ego tends to dissociate itself from its universe, whose partner it should be. After all, the ego is the locus of man's original sin. Subconsciously, the Mentawaians appear to be aware of this.

There is ample reason not to underestimate the role of covert antagonisms in Mentawai society. The emphasis on harmony as a cultural ideal notwithstanding, there is a great deal of distrust between the different *uma*, the *uma* occupying one and the same valley included. Each *uma* being strictly exogamous, they are each other's indispensable partners in marriage negotiations. Actually, nocturnal visits to other *uma* of the same valley are a standing habit among every community's youngsters. Yet, the various *uma* never have celebrations together. Even marriage ceremonies do not bring the relevant *uma* together, each of them celebrating the event in the intimacy of its own community. It is the only place believed to be perfectly safe. Fear of sorcery keeps the different *uma* divided. There used to be only one occasion for different *uma* to unite to do things together, and that was, *mirabile dictu*, the organization and execution of a headhunting raid. In this case, cooperation was a dire necessity because such raids used to be directed to distant valleys, and for such an undertaking a single *uma* was far too weak. Several of them had to unite to provide the necessary manpower. But even so, if there is anything that conflicts with the overt ideals of peace and harmony, it is a headhunt, the more so as this was directed to a distant valley — a circumstance which practically excludes desire for revenge as an inspiring motive. Besides, the (fairly meagre) available information suggests that successful warriors did not know too well what to do with the skulls captured. They showed themselves to be afraid of their own trophies. Why, then, did they go on the warpath at all?

This is a question not raised by me, but by Schefold himself. In reply to it he suggests that at the time the colonial government intervened and put a stop to the custom, the Mentawaians' zest for headhunting was already decreasing. They willingly obeyed their new masters. The arguments put forward to support this hypothesis are acceptable, but fail to explain why they continued to indulge in headhunting until a foreign power forced them to abstain from it. What — in the absence of any imaginable demonstrable provocation — did motivate these peaceful people to set out on the warpath? If I understand Schefold correctly, he hopes to find the explanation in the early history and past cultural contacts of the Mentawaians. However, history may explain the origin of a custom, but not its persistence under unfavourable conditions. For an explanation of the persistence of the custom of headhunting, the presence of some form of inner aggressive drive is essential.

In this context, a comparison with the Marind-anim suggests itself. They are, culturally and historically, an entirely different people. Living in the southeastern part of Irian, they have nothing in common with the Mentawai people except exactly that they, too, used to direct their headhunting raids to distant tribes who had never given them reason for such hostile behaviour. In their case it was suggested that they were urged by pent-up feelings of aggression generated by the highly contradictory relations

between the sexes (cf. my 'The Dialectics of Sex in Marind-anim Culture', in: G.H. Herdt (ed.), *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia*, 1984). This is not an appropriate explanation for the Mentawai case. Yet, their cultural institutions bear testimony that among them, too, there is question of covert aggressive drives which, so far, have not been accounted for. The *pitto*' complex is a case in point. It gives us reason to consider the possibility that, to the Mentaweians, their peaceful life in isolation was not as satisfactory as, from an ethical point of view, it ought to have been. Did these people really find the satisfaction they coveted in their extensive, over-elaborate ritual? Schefold himself suggests that they were not unaware of the vanity of their strenuous efforts at establishing lasting peace and harmony.

I must leave these observations for what they are worth. It is not for me to philosophize on the inner depths of Mentawai culture. These remarks were made simply for the purpose of drawing attention to the fact that Schefold's description of Mentawai ritual possesses qualities which give one reason to expect that we will find it often quoted in future theoretical discussions among anthropologists. This meticulous description has turned the Mentawai case into one of the chosen few to which a famous quotation from Durkheim is applicable: 'Un fait bien enregistré en vaut mieux que mille d'autres'. For this reason some will deplore the circumstance that the book has not been written in English. They should bear in mind that for a description that is so rich in detail an author necessarily falls back on his mother tongue, unless he be absolutely bilingual — a rare gift. In Schefold's case, who has Dutch as his second language, even trilinguality would have been called for! There is good reason to prefer a book written in good German, as is the one here presented, to one in less perfect English, the writing of which would have taken many more years than have been devoted to the present volume.

Finally, a word of praise is in place for the perfect lay-out of the book, and in particular for its wealth of enlightening photographs, practically all of them made by the author himself.