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REVIEW ARTICLE

JAN POWWER

THE HIDDEN FLOW

James Weiner, *The heart of the pearl shell: The mythological dimension of Foi sociology*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1988, Studies in Melanesian Anthropology, no. 6; 322 p., 2 maps, 16 figures, 13 ills.

The heart of the pearl shell is based on 27 months of field work conducted over three periods between July of 1979 and January of 1985. It deals with the Foi people, 4,500 in number, who live near the border of the Southern Highlands and Gulf Provinces of Papua New Guinea. They inhabit the Mubi valley and the area to the east of Lake Kutubu, well-known from the studies of F.E. Williams (1938-9), the first Australian government anthropologist. From both an ecological and a cultural perspective, the Mubi valley lies between the Highlands and the Lowlands, occupying an intermediate position.

With the exception of sago, the Foi subsistence economy is primarily based on seasonal variations. The residential unit is the longhouse community, consisting of a central men's dwelling flanked by smaller individual women's houses. Each community is associated with two to four others, which together form a distinct unit. The author calls these 'extended communities'. The extended community was said to act as a unit in warfare, and still acts as a unit in competitive feasting and exchange. Less than 10 per cent of all individuals – male or female – marry outside their community. Although the Foi have the longest history of permanent contact with the colonial administration of all groups in the province (since 1949), they have experienced only modest economic development. The money that the Foi earn accounts for only a small portion of traditional payments, including bridewealth. Yet there has been considerable inflation of these payments due to the introduction of large numbers of pearl shells by the Australian administration. Initially shells were so scarce as not to form part of payments at all. The increase in the inflation rate coincided with a rapid growth in population and a subsequent attenuation of the importance of kin groups. In a few decades the pearl shell has become a major social fact pervading all domains of Foi life. This is reflected in the title of Weiner's book.

For Weiner, culture is a world of meanings. His conception brings to mind – though, in my view, unintentionally – Mauss' definition of social

life as a 'world of symbolic relationships' (see Lévi-Strauss 1987:10) and Lévi-Strauss' contention that '... in both anthropological and linguistic research, we are dealing strictly with symbolism' (Lévi-Strauss 1968:51). Though Weiner refers to French authors in semiology and structuralism, he draws on the American tradition of semiotics and symbolic anthropology, represented by Wagner, Geertz and Sahlins, in that order. For him the metaphor, Ricoeur's trope, is the 'atom' of the symbolic universe (p.6). A metaphor is a reflexive, motivated relationship between two elements that are both similar and dissimilar. These elements are drawn from different groups of lexical items (syntagms) in arbitrary conventional language. These groups are concurrent with particular contexts: the items of furniture that belong in a given room, for instance (p.123). Now, by connecting items from different syntagms, each concurrent with different contexts, a speaker brings about 'a change or deviation affecting the meaning of a word' – again, this is Ricoeur's trope. The author gives as an example: marsupials and women. Both are part of different, context-bound syntagmatic chains in conventional Fijian language, including wild pigs and cassowaries with marsupials, and men and children with women. The inventive metaphor 'women are marsupials' is a reflexive one. Men thus express that both are desirable and difficult to obtain.

Metaphorization is a perfect tool for constructing a cosmology, since like/unlike pairs of elements can be selected almost endlessly from context-bound syntagms. Also, the metaphors take on a life of their own: women *are* marsupials. Metaphors thus appear to be self-contained (though they are not). Metaphorization thus has a wonderful capacity to generate a world of meanings (culture). Still, this process tends to turn in on itself. It tends to produce a closed universe. Its substitution of one metaphor for another is endless: a reflexive semiosis.

Apparently – and here a point of criticism emerges – the self-contained nature of metaphors and their substitutions has not only seduced the participant but also the observer, in this case Weiner. Weiner reduces the referent, the context, the reality-out-there, to a symbolic universe. Social relationships are now merely the results of tropic constructions for Weiner (p.7). Also, rather than distinguishing between two domains, culture and social structure, Weiner unifies these into one: sociality (p.2), equally a tropic construction. Further, in line with Sahlins (1976), to whom economics is primarily a symbolic construction rather than a historic reality, Weiner considers the seasonal modes of subsistence as yet another metaphor. Here Weiner draws on Mauss' famous seasonal variations of social morphology of the Inuit, or Eskimo (p.37). Weiner goes so far as to take the distinction between the factual and the representational as itself a symbolic construction (p.2). In so doing, he runs the risk of reducing facts to symbolic connections instead of upholding the relative autonomy of data and history.

Since metaphors and their substitutions abound in myths almost by

definiton, the analysis of myths offers a vantage point shrewdly exploited by the author. Weiner even analysed Foi mythology before he interpreted the symbolic dimension of Foi society (p.150). Also, his interpretation of the relationship between myth and belief on the one hand, and magic spells, curing ceremonies and cults on the other, reflects his emphasis on metaphors and symbolism. Weiner sees the two as contrasting complements. Magic hides what it reveals, whereas myth reveals the hidden source of nature, sociality, or cosmos (p.14). Veiled spells manipulate one component of a metaphoric relationship, such as tree leaves, in order to effect the other component, for example illness.

Weiner's analysis of 130 folk-tales and myths, a fraction of which is discussed in the second part of the book (in Chapters 6-12), reveals that Foi myth is concerned with the hidden flow of vital and personal energies. This flow permeates the Foi cosmos through its multifarious metaphoric substitutions. Magic spells and the actions and intentions of both men and women affect and manipulate the cosmic flow. Especially men are able to articulate, direct and redirect the cosmic flow into appropriate channels so as to create and maintain the artifice of human sociality (p.9, 139). Weiner calls these human operations 'obviation', following Wagner. While for Lévi-Strauss invisible structure is manifest and can be traced empirically through a study of its transformations and permutations, for Weiner the hidden cosmic flow reveals itself through obviation in an empirical study of metaphors and their infinite substitutions and alterations. The two relate as structuralism to hermeneutics.

What is Foi society about? Weiner writes: '... to characterize the context of Foi society, perhaps nothing more need be said than that it is the constant re-creation of male and female (re)productivity out of the affinity and vice versa ... Intersexual and affinal mediation emerge as the chief modes of social differentiation for the Foi' (p.9). Six of the twelve chapters address this theme. The relationship between the sexes is a central societal device, functioning as a cosmological charter. Since it exceeds by far the concept of gender, the current term for socially constituted sex roles, the author does not use this term.

The Foi believe that female identity is given, whereas male identity is made and must be achieved through adherence to ritual restrictions and regimens. Women's menstruation is an innate capacity that is at once the source of regeneration and of lethal illness. Males are the fabricated guardians of the social edifice. Since they lack the power of menstruation, it is their responsibility to appropriate it ritually so as to control the life-giving and lethal aspects of menstruation for the sake of sociality. It is their duty to keep the sexes separate. At the same time they cannot get around the co-residence of the sexes (though in separate living-quarters), their cohabitation (in two senses of the word), their co-(re)productivity (though in separate spheres), and their interdependence – in sum, the complemen-

tarity of the sexes. The paradox of separate yet together, together yet separate, is mediated by an unremitting oscillation, a spiralling dialectical movement. In this the Foi, particularly the men but also the women, obviate by directing and manipulating the flow of vital energies and bodily fluids between them.

Figures 6-9, central to Weiner's method, perfectly illustrate the dialectics of obviation. Figure 6, for example (p.140), deals with tropic alternation in Foi secular marriage sequences. It starts with the opposition male:female. This is substituted by the opposition male wife-taker:female wife-giver, operated by an exchange of male and female goods. The next substitutional trope is the opposition male child-taker:female child-giver, set in motion by a transfer of male goods. The final substitution is the relationship FaSiSo:MoBrSo, equalling a male-female relationship, which is activated by payments between the two types of cross-cousins. So the spiral returns to its origin. The movement starts with separate sexes and then alternates through affinity to consanguinity. It ends on an ambiguous note – cross-cousins are like brothers because they are children of siblings, yet they are unlike brothers because their fathers are brothers-in-law. The cosmic flow is obviated between the sexes through their metaphoric substitutions.

This type of analysis, of which Figure 6 is only a simple example, is consistently applied by the author to various levels of Foi sociality: to ritual and to myth and to the relationships between them. It yields a stream of substitutions, alternates, conversions, and transformations which interconnect the social fabric. In this respect this book is an impressive landmark in the semiotic analysis of one particular society.

My criticism of Weiner's work, though, is implicit in the foregoing summary. Weiner's American semiotic approach short-circuits a Continental style of semiotic analysis. Firstly, it cuts out explicit cross-cultural comparison. Secondly, it collapses or reduces reality-out-there and history into an infinite semiosis. Thirdly, in so doing, it betrays an affinity with the absolute relativism of post-modern anthropology. These criticisms are interconnected.

Let me start with Weiner's explicitly discussed relationship to the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss (pp.11-2, 154-73). It seems as if he relates to Lévi-Strauss as to a metaphorical, ambiguous cross-cousin. On the one hand he does not wish to negate the work of Lévi-Strauss, but to augment it (p.155). Like the French master, he convincingly demonstrates the overwhelming power that human language, and hence culture, possesses (p.155). Like Lévi-Strauss, he reveals the splendour of virtually endless culture-specific substitutions, inversions, transformations, modalities and homologies. On the other hand, Weiner contrasts his metaphorical observational analysis with the structural-transformational one, saying:

'In *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss traces the inversions and trans-

formations in various "elementary" oppositions of the mythology of cultures throughout North and South America. His methodology is deliberately cross-cultural, being concerned with codes and information rather than with meaning. Hence the structures that result from such comparison have no implication for describing any particular society as a conceptual or symbolic totality. My approach stands in opposition to that of Lévi-Strauss: to see not only each society's mythology as a self-contained corpus, but each myth itself as a pristine and complete figurative construction in its own right, not comparable except at a purely formal level to myths of other societies. The structural relationships of inversions between Foi myth that I trace represent not the encoding of invariant oppositions but the figurative relationship of elements in a single metaphoric structure that encompasses a meaning only for that particular culture. Structure is thus the residuum of metaphor, for the myths stand in some determinate relationship to conventional syntagmatic orders.' (pp.12-3.)

It is obvious from this citation that Weiner cuts out explicit cross-cultural comparison, universal codes and a universal structure. Lévi-Strauss is said to drop his universal, naturally derived, invariant, 'culturally unmotivated' (p.171) codes and paradigmatic oppositions onto the cultural scene – codes and oppositions such as right:left, above:below or raw:cooked. In contrast, Weiner's closures of metaphoric language are culture-specific, tropic constructions, generated by the specific process of metaphorization itself, Lévi-Strauss' closures derive from the process of the universal *pensée sauvage* common to the human mind. Weiner's enterprise transforms 'primitive' isolates into an archipelago of free-floating, mesmerizing isolates. *But isolated they remain*, because they are cut loose from their moorings in objective reality *and* in history. Reality and history are submerged in culture-specific symbolism. The logical consequence of this is the absolute relativism of post-modern anthropology, which only describes, in particular, accessible *or* obscurantist tropes, and which is unable, and even unwilling, to compare cross-culturally. It interprets, but does not attempt to explain.

Lévi-Strauss' archipelago of equally multi-splendoured islands is *not* free-floating, but is moored in reality-out- there, as mediated by universal human brains that are, incidentally, also part of this reality, and yet separate, in an endless and equally powerful dialectic. There is far more to structure and its transformations than mere empty formalism. Lévi-Strauss' conceptual mooring in objective reality, not drowned in symbolism, allows of cross-cultural comparison. Anthropology without explicit cross-cultural comparison boils down to fragmented, though impeccably detailed, ethnography. As for history, it is evident from Weiner's study that the fairly recent introduction of the pearl shell has been metaphorized. In

a magnificent myth (p.279-83) the 'heart' of the pearl shell is revealed to be a mythic and continuous flow, like the movement of birds. I note here the striking parallelism with *kain timur*, which are equally important valuables (Indonesian textiles) and the focus of inland Bird's Head cultures in Irian Jaya. These, too, are said to fly around like birds. The imagery is quite appropriate, for both pearl shells and *kain timur* circulate in a constant flow of exchanges and reciprocity, permeating all dimensions of society. The flowing calligraphy of the title on the cover of Weiner's book alludes to this notion.

Yet the very introduction of the pearl shell, of inflation and the consequent attenuation of kin groups, cannot be explained through metaphorization. The reality of history cannot be assimilated by metaphorization, it can only be signified.

I conclude my review with a critical technical note concerning Weiner's use of semiotics. He assumes that participants of a culture generate metaphorical meanings by inserting selections of syntagmatic chains taken from *conventional*, first-order language into a paradigm of *inventional*, second-order metaphorical language (p.123). This assumption short-circuits both first-order and second-order language by directly connecting items of the syntagmatic chain of the first order with the paradigmatic system of the second order. Weiner thus skips both the paradigmatic system of the conventional language and the syntagmatic chain of the inventional one. This is an unwarranted amputation, particularly because paradigm and syntagm presuppose each other. Each of the two language orders has a syntagm and a paradigm of its own. Weiner's 'jump' from one order to the other is therefore logically incorrect and empirically impoverishing. An elegant and logically consistent shift from one order to the other is made by Barthes (1976:89, 90), where he connects the first-order language of denotation with the second-order language of connotation. Complete signs (à la De Saussure) of the first order, for example 'marsupial' and 'woman', taken from different syntagmatic chains, function as *signifiers* of a particular *signified* of the second order, for example 'metaphorical woman'. Other first-order signs may be added at will as signifiers of connoted signifieds (metaphorical woman), for instance all the soft parts of the human body (see p.50, concerning conception). So I disagree with Weiner when he says (p.124) that the terms 'signifier' and 'signified' become meaningless in the case of metaphors. On the contrary, this distinction enhances the multifaceted character of metaphors, the *signifieds* of which may be designated by a multitude of – even mutually contrasting and contradicting – *signifiers* taken from conventional language. Weiner should have paid more than lip-service to Continental semiology.

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