

Introduction Asian World Views: Context and Structure

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The title of this volume, "Asian World Views: Context and Structure," has partly been chosen for practical reasons, but it also implies certain theoretical issues discussed by the authors of this special edition. The focus on "Asia" allowed me to join scholars who have been working on various topics and are known to me either through scientific co-operation at the same institute or shared theoretical or regional interests. The same holds for the concern with "World Views" (Weltanschauungen), an expression with a very broad meaning and therefore suitable to encompass quite different approaches to the study of culture and society.

Apart from these practical reasons the title also captures certain ideas and experiences the contributors to this special edition are concerned with. For example, all authors have a common interest in symbolic aspects of social life and in cultural phenomena. In contrast to scholars who first define a particular phenomena as their topic of research and then study this phenomena world-wide, the authors of this volume "found" their topic in the field. For instance, the importance of truck art in Pakistan, female asceticism in Kacchh, laments of death in Azerbaijan or healers in tribal villages of Orissa must be directly experienced. These phenomena are deeply embedded in particular cultural and social contexts and their significance derives primarily from local discourses and not from our scholarly debates. This does not mean, however, that we should neglect scientific debates and restrict ourselves to ethnography. But it is at least my opinion that our comparative enterprise starts with ethnography and then turns to general debates and not vice versa. If we proceed the other way round chances are great that we miss the viewpoint of others. To me the expression "World Views" captures this relativistic approach to the study of others, the idea that progress in our

subject is achieved through our knowledge of the culturally specific. This is not to deny that our subject has a universal tendency, but I follow Dumont who argues that the universal can only be understood by comparing "specific, concrete global societies" (Dumont, 1986: 206). This expression seems to contain a contradiction which disappears when we take into account Dumont's definition of a "global" society. He does not refer to the usual definition of global society as the result of a world-wide unification of culture through mass media, means of transportation, trade, migrations etc. His use of the word is based on the observation that there exist different "mental universes" (ibid.) or societies with their own holistic ideology. Holism here means that man is subordinated to society as a whole and that each society identifies its own specific form with humanity (ibid.: 207). I agree with Dumont that the task of the anthropologist is basically that of a translator, who "must 'translate' one mentality into another," and for this operation it is necessary to "see things both from within and from without" (ibid.: 206). The problem is not so much to "reject the exclusivism or absolute sociocentrism" (ibid.: 207) of others, but to acknowledge one's own sociocentrism and accept that "*our own modern culture and society ...[is] a particular form of humanity*" (ibid., orig. emphasis). In this sense, my use of the expression "World Views" implies a holistic and relativistic approach to culture. It implies an interest in other people's perspectives and in comparing ideologies or systems of ideas and values of "specific, concrete global societies."

Another important impetus for the study of world views comes from Clifford Geertz. In his article "Religion as a Cultural System," he defines a world view as "the picture they [the people] have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order"

(1975: 89). According to Geertz, it is in sacred symbols that a particular style of life ("ethos") and certain world views ("specific metaphysic") meet and reinforce each other. In religion, a cosmic order is arranged in relation to the realm of experiences and human actions are — vice versa — related to the envisaged order of the world. As an example one might refer to the Geertzian interpretation of rituals: "In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turns out to be the same world..." (ibid.: 112). This mutual reinforcement is said to be an aspect of the religious perspective. For Geertz, a perspective is "a particular way of looking at life, a particular manner of construing the world" (ibid.: 110). He distinguishes the religious perspective from other major types of perspective like the common-sensical, the scientific and the aesthetic. Following Alfred Schuetz he defines common sense as the "simple acceptance of the world" and as an attempt to "bend it [the world] to one's practical purpose" (ibid.: 111). In contrast, the scientific perspective is said to be characterised by its institutionalised scepticism, non-pragmatic motives and systematic methods of investigation and analysis. Both orientations are again distinguished by Geertz from the aesthetic perspective which has neither the pragmatic motives of common sense nor the distanced, sceptical attitude of the scientific perspective, but rather shows "an eager dwelling upon appearances," a "contemplation of sensory qualities" (ibid.). For Geertz, the "religious perspective" differs from the other major perspectives in that it goes beyond the realities of everyday life, aims at truths and not hypotheses and does not create illusions, but gives everything an "aura of utter actuality" (ibid.: 112). In this way religion expresses conceptions of general order and at the same time creates the emotional and motivational dispositions that make people believe. For participants, rituals are "not only models of what they believe, but also models *for* the believing of it" (ibid.: 114, orig. emphasis). The most important conclusion I draw from this article is that world views do not exist in mind only but are closely related to performances, either in ritual or any other form of institutionalised human action. They are not only an image of the world, but

basically derive their power and coherence from their confrontation with the world. When studying symbolic expressions like truck art, rituals or kinship systems we should compare the cognitive with the practical level because both are intimately related and "meanings" are created in the confrontation between the two levels.

This leads us to the subtitle of this paper, "Context and Structure." The world views presented in this volume are never arbitrary or chaotic but show a systematic order. This order is based on a certain arrangement of ideas, which might be a holistic system based on simple structures or a loose, open configuration of various elements. Maps are a good illustration of this. For example, a traditional map of Puri, a sacred pilgrimage centre at the Bay of Bengal, depicts the whole town in the form of a conch-shell and this holistic scheme will not change even if the present layout of the town alters due to new roads and buildings. This is in sharp contrast to a modern street map which can be enlarged or reduced as long as certain principles like unity of scale or distances are taken into account. In this way, the arrangement itself is an expression of the specific ideology under study, or as Dumont puts it, "value is embedded in the configuration of ideas itself" (1986: 260). This means that the order expressed in world views is culturally variable and depends on values of the "specific, concrete global society." It does not derive from these considerations that we study ideology independently from the empirical level. Dumont, for instance, examines the relation between the ideological and the empirical level in Hindu India. In his study of the caste system, he shows that there exist two situations, value situations and power situations, the latter manifesting themselves only on the empirical level. To me, this means that ideology is neither a simple abstraction of empirical situations nor a matrix covering everything that happens "in this world." The matter becomes more complex when we take into account the existence of various values and ideas which are not necessarily arranged in one monolithic block. For instance, during the last two to three decades various scholars studied values attached to ascetism, royalty or female gender in India which in certain respects oppose brahmanical notions of purity and impurity. It is

not only that we must confront the ideological with the empirical level, but also enlarge our knowledge of the empirically existing conceptions of the world. For example, many authors of this special volume participate in a research project on Orissa (India) financed by the German Research Council. Its main aim is to shift our attention from the geographical and social centre to the periphery, from a monolithic to a multi-centric characterisation of the region and from a descriptive to a contextualising and interpretative approach to sources. The latter point is of particular relevance for this volume, because it leads us to the question of context. In the above mentioned Orissa Research Project, Indologists stress the need to interpret texts within their contexts. This approach has been postulated by Anthropologist, specially from Britain, since long. For example, in 1950 Evans-Pritchard in his famous Marrett Lecture favoured an interpretative approach similar to the contextual approach of historical science:

"What social anthropologists have in fact chiefly been doing is to write cross-sections of history, integrative descriptive accounts of primitive peoples at a moment of time which are in other respects like the accounts written by historians about peoples over a period of time, for the historian does not just record sequences of events but seeks to establish connections between them." (1962: 24)

But what does it mean to "establish connections between them"? Usually the answer to this question is that one has to place an event or action into its context. But as far as I can see there are at least two meanings attached to the word "context." In one sense, context refers to a complex setting of events, actions or "circumstances" that are related to the object of our study, for example to the building of a Visnu temple by a particular Hindu king. History produces new situations in which the elements are permanently rearranged. This arrangement comes into being by chance or by cause and effect. Our aim will be to identify the concrete way actions are interrelated. We will establish sequences of events in time and "explain" actions by studying individual motivations, property relations, power structures etc. This is the moment when culture and a second meaning of context may be introduced into

the process of "integrating the facts." "Context" in structural linguistics and structural anthropology refers to the use of pre-existing structures in speech (*parole*) or other forms of cultural communication. It refers to the idea that the meaning of each element can be derived from its syntagmatic relations, i. e. relations between elements in praesentia, as well as from its paradigmatic relations, i. e. relations between elements in absentia. From this point of view, the elements in each context are not related by chance or by cause and effect but by a pre-existing system of meaning. Structural analysis analyses situations as manifestations of ideas and looks at the relation between different situations. For example, we could interpret the above mentioned building of a Visnu temple in the framework of concepts of royalty or a particular system of social relations between kings, priests and gods. The difference between the two approaches or uses of the word "context" seems to be one of framework: one approach focuses on the individual and his/her motivations in a specific historical situation, the other considers the super-individual, cultural background and sees a particular situation as belonging to a culturally produced group of situations. Within cultural studies following the latter method, we find an interesting difference between Evans-Pritchard and Dumont on the one hand and Geertz on the other. Geertz sees a danger "of locking cultural analysis from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life" (1975: 17) and he therefore favours descriptions of social discourses. These descriptions should be "microscopic" (ibid.: 21) and should deal with "extremely small matters" (ibid.). Without denying that this is indeed the starting point of every anthropological analysis, Evans-Pritchard as well as Dumont, both being influenced by Marcel Mauss, do see a higher level of integrating the facts. For instance, Evans-Pritchard writes: "He [social anthropologist] tries to disclose the structural patterns of society. Having isolated these patterns in one society he compares them with patterns in other societies." (1962: 23) In a similar manner, Dumont distinguishes two levels of analysis, one being the "global level" on which mankind is compared to "the garden of Herder," the other being the level of a particular society or culture seen as a "concrete universal" (1986: 213).

The difference to the Geertzian approach lies in the place given to culture. For Geertz, the cultural framework has its value as a context for interpreting events, while for Evans-Pritchard and Dumont empirical observations are one of the many sources that help us to understand the cultural and social system itself. Thus, the basic question every one of us has to answer is whether he or she wants to understand specific events or systems of ideas and values. This is not to say that both approaches are absolutely exclusive or to deny that they are of benefit to each other.

Let me sum up the above considerations concerning the theoretical frame of this volume. It is being argued that the objects of our study should be established empirically and not through preconceived ideas of what might be relevant in other societies. A relativistic and holistic approach to world views is being favoured, seeing them as products of particular global societies. Following Geertz, we consider it important to study world views in their application, because conceptions of order and their performance are intimately connected and reinforce each other. When doing fieldwork we experience the "lived-in orders" (Lévi-Strauss, 1967: 306) and we should ask ourselves if there is only one discourse or whether we are able to find a hierarchy of discourses depending on power structures, social stratification or location. By focusing on notions of "structure" and "context" I want to stress the difference between cultural studies that are either concerned with events or with systems of ideas and values. It is finally being asked at which level of understanding our abstractions should be located.

The authors of this special volume contribute to the above mentioned theoretical debates and questions, although perhaps none of them exactly shares the ideas of the editor. Anna Schmid's article is a good example for an approach that analyses symbolic world views within particular contexts. She deals with the impressive truck art of Pakistan, which she interprets in the framework of three different domains: the religious, the political and the cultural. Her interpretations of truck art are based on statements by drivers, painters and the wider Pakistani public. From these statements she draws the conclusion that truck art in Pakistan is "an

arena of contest," where dominant discourses are subverted or negotiated and new ideas produced. Seeing truck art as a form of popular culture allows her to understand how people create representations and to put into question "the long prevailing assumption of passive consumerism."

Vishvajit Pandya's article on "Spirits, Politics and Rituals in History of the Nicobar islands" also represents a contextual approach to world views. Drawing on historical sources and colonial ethnographies the author analyses the relation between religion and politics during the colonial and missionary enterprise. The colonial separation of these domains is contrasted with the fusion of ideas of power, morality and faith in Nicobarese culture. Dealing with accounts of collective execution of possessed human beings ("devil murder"), the author exemplifies the different world views of Nicobarese and colonialists. While for the colonialists power belonged to administration, the Nicobarese considered economy, justice and order as part of the spirit world. Good government in the Nicobarese sense of the word means attracting good spirits and repelling bad spirits. This was the duty of shamans (*mineluans*), through whom the colonialists tried to control cases of Devil Murder. The author convincingly demonstrates that the colonial intrusion was conceived by the Nicobarese as part of the all-pertaining principle of attracting and repelling spirits. By using Western objects like flags in the same way as traditional carvings for the spirits (called Hanta-Koi) the shaman tried to "attract or repel the Western outsiders."

The culturally specific relation between religion and politics is also the theme of Roland Hardenberg's article on "Visnus's sleep, Mahisa's attack, Durga's victory: Concepts of royalty in a sacrificial drama." It deals with royal rituals in Puri, a temple town at the Bay of Bengal (India). Drawing on extensive fieldwork, the author describes and analyses several festivals, in particular the annual Durga Puja which celebrates the goddess' victory over demonic forces. His interpretations belong to two analytical levels. On the one hand, he compares the Durga Puja with the contents of a mythical text, the Debi Mahatmya, and decodes the sacred symbols in

order to understand the cultural messages of this festival. On the other hand he sees the Durga Puja as part of a system of royal rituals that are governed by certain values. At the end of his paper the author suggests a model of these values which is said to be typical for Hindu conceptions of the world.

There are three articles in this special volume dealing with symbolic orders in the realm of kinship. One is by **Uwe Skoda**, who compares the kinship system of a dominant peasant caste, the Aghria of Orissa (India), with three models of kinship other authors constructed from previous studies in North, South and Middle India: the "indo-aryan," the "dravidian" and the 'mundaic'. Following Needham and Barnard & Good, the author organises his comparative data on three levels, the terminological (or cognitive), the normative and the practical (or behavioural). Each level is analysed on its own before at the end of the paper an attempt is made to define the interrelations between these three levels, with the astonishing result that there exists an "impressive autonomy of the different levels." The author comes to the conclusion that this lack of congruence could be the result of a unique syncretism of the three Indian kinship systems.

A similar approach is followed in the second article on kinship by **Christian Strümpell**, who clearly distinguishes between the different levels of analysis. His paper deals with one of the major questions in Indian kinship studies, i. e. the question of whether or not the North Indian kinship system lacks the diachronic aspect identified by Dumont in the "dravidian" kinship system. Without having done fieldwork on the topic himself, the author develops completely new insights into the North Indian kinship system by reviewing the ethnographic data presented by Sylvia Vatuk. Taking into account linguistic differences in this North Indian kinship terminology he comes to the conclusion that in the three central generations affines are distinguished from consanguines. He suggests that affines of a wife-giving side are transformed into consanguines while those of a wife-taking side remain affines. This hypothesis is confirmed by his reinterpretation of the normative level of kinship, i. e. the gift-giving observed by Vatuk. In contrast to her, he identifies a binary structure in this North In-

dian kinship system, because "affinity is defined...through the giving of women and gifts and not through receiving them."

The third article that explicitly deals with kinship is written by **Ingrid Schindlbeck**. She analyses laments of death and different rites of gift-giving in Azerbaijan and asks how this genre is related to local conceptions of female gender. By focusing on the way the social roles of mother, sister and daughter are combined and transformed in these songs and rituals, she comes to the conclusion that a particular value is attached to uterine kinship or "milk kinship" (*süd qohumluq*). The linguistic and ritual transformation of daughters into mothers expresses "the value of motherhood or fecundity" which stands "in the centre of the female uterine kin group." The author convincingly argues that the relationship of mother and daughter has a hierarchical aspect in terms of filiation while it is characterised by equality when seen as part of milk kinship.

Female constructions of social identities are also the topic of **Helene Basu's** article on "Local Concepts of Women Ascetics: Living Goddesses of the Charan." The name Charan stands for one of several Northwest Indian castes of cattle-raisers, whose self-perception is closely related to the goddess and to her power (*sakti*). Among the Charan of Kacchh the author studied the deification of female ascetics, who are called Mataji and are said to possess extraordinary *sakti*. They become "living goddesses" by liberating themselves from male domination and from social control by the community. In her article, the author illustrates the process of becoming a female ascetic by focusing on the personal story of Deval Ma, one of the "great" Matajis of Kacchh. Abstaining from sexual intercourse, purifying her body with physical disciplines, freeing herself from social obligations of exchange, the Mataji becomes an embodiment of *dharma* and acquires spiritual powers to bless and to curse. Comparing the social identity of a Mataji with that of a Hindu housewife the author rejects Meena Khandelwal's thesis that female asceticism applies the same ideas and concepts which define the life of a married women. Furthermore, by emphasising the gendered nature of both hierarchy and individualism she puts into

questions theories of caste and asceticism that are exclusively based on male constructions.

A particular form of male asceticism is presented by Lidia Guzy in her article "On the road with the babas. Some insights into local features of Mahima Dharma." Mahima Dharma is an indigenous religious reform movement in rural Orissa consisting of male ascetics (*baba*) who provide priestly services, ritually active lay devotees (*bhakta*) and ritually passive believers (*visvasi*). Drawing on the results of her recent fieldwork, the author first describes the code of conduct of the ascetics. Like the Matajis in Kacchh, the Babas are said to possess *sakti* and powers to bless and to curse which they acquire through radical chastity and discipline of the body. Next, the author gives an account of the organisational features of the movement. According to her analysis, Mahima Dharma is the religion of the rural elite and closely related to a traditional patronage system, in which local landlords sponsor religious centres (*tirtha*) and ritual activities of the movement. The most important ritual of the movement is the fire ceremony (*jagia*) performed by the ascetics. Low caste people try to raise their status by sponsoring a *jagia* and thus imitating the habitus of the rural elite. The money donations given by the devotees to the ascetics are seen by the author as a "salvatory form of capital" and as part of the "sacred economy" of Mahima Dharma. Lidia Guzy's research will continue in the tribal areas of Orissa, whose population has been studied by the last two authors of this volume.

The paper by Georg Pfeffer on "Tribal Ideas" applies the above mentioned comparative project suggested by Evans-Pritchard and Dumont to the tribal population of Middle India. As in Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer, the author is concerned with social morphology and ideology which he sees as closely related. After carefully distinguishing different tribal complexes, he gives a general account of the Middle Indian tribal design which like Evans-Pritchard's model of the Nuer is a regular pattern of interrelated ideas not actions. He compares the Middle Indian tribal structure with two other designs, the "African" model (e.g. Nuer and Tallensi) and the "Biblical" model (e.g. Pathans and Polynesians). He comes to the conclusion that in spite of certain similari-

ties the former has certain unique features like the lack of connections between the segmentary levels. For instance, the author cannot find what Marshall Sahlins calls a "segmentary calculus," because in the Middle Indian tribal design the juxtaposition of segments remains confined to a single segmentary level due to the absence of centralisation along lines of descent. The differences between these "designs" are illustrated by comparing the relation of respect between father and son among Bedouins with the hostility and distance between adjacent generations in Middle Indian tribal society. The author rejects the notion of tribal equality as a "confusion of status and power." In Middle India, status differences like the hierarchy of seniority or of differential access to transcendence are omnipresent, whereas individuals can hardly be distinguished in terms of power and wealth. In the final part of this paper, this observation is used by the author to refine Dumont's comparisons between societies at the global level. The lack of powerful political institutions and individuals among tribals and hunters and gatherers is considered to be an important aspect of nonmodern society differentiating it from traditional (e.g. caste society) as well as modern society (e.g. Western individualism).

A second contribution to the world views of tribals in Middle India is Tina Otten's paper "In a Remote Area: Categories of the Person and Illness among the Desya of Koraput, Orissa." Desya or "people of the land" is a very broad category including all people that inhabit the hilly regions of Koraput in South Orissa. Because of basic similarities in culture and social structure, they can be regarded as members of tribal society although the category contains people who are officially considered "Scheduled Castes" (SC) or "Other Backward Classes" (OBC). The author recently spent several months of fieldwork in a remote village of Koraput District and studied rituals of healing. In her paper, she introduces us to various categories of local healing experts and to indigenous concepts of health and illness. Agents of illness are gods, spirits of deceased persons, spirits of women who died in labour and witches or sorcerers. They represent external factors which permeate the body of a person and either "fill him or her with their forces or take

life force out of the body." Indigenous healing specialists perform rituals in order to identify the source of illness and to extract it from the body. The body appears as a particularly vulnerable and permeable object. The author interprets the ethnographic data in the framework of basic ideas of medical anthropology, in particular the distinction between the physical, social and political aspect of the body. She identifies two interrelated ideas in the Desya concept of the body: on the one hand the body is used as an instrument for re-establishing order, on the other hand the condition of the world is reflected in the body.

For instance, when there is "too much moving" in the world, the result will be illness and disorder which have to be removed by rituals.

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