When I began my course in Social Anthropology in 1955, I received a post-card from my Tutor informing me that he had arranged for Mr. Leach to supervise me. The news meant little to me. After two years in Classics, I had a purely instrumental attitude to supervision, and I expected to gain nothing more than academic guidance from it. Mr. Leach (he had a London doctorate) was therefore a shock. He did not dazzle me with intellectual fireworks in those pre-structuralist days, but he made an immensely powerful impression on me nonetheless. I am still not quite sure how he did it.

I was of course in some degree a ready candidate. I had read Classics because I happened to be good at it at school, and I had moved into a smaller, non-school subject which I read because it had seemed interesting. I also very quickly realised that the Department was a small friendly community to which students, undergraduate and graduate alike, genuinely belonged, and this helped to kindle and fuel my enthusiasm. But this was only a small part of it. All too many teachers are capable of dampening an enthusiastic student’s intellectual excitement, but Edmund never had that awful power. Without apparent effort, he fired one’s interest in whatever he touched upon, and by the end of my first term I was besotted. My friends began to threaten to boycott me if I did not stop talking about “that man, Leach”, whom they had never even heard of, let alone met, before I started harassing them with my reports about him. There was clearly a remarkable charisma to him with his tall, almost gangling, figure and his odd mixture of outspokenness and shyness. How I longed to get to know him better, and how I envied those easy-going, and sometimes dim, ex-public school boys who called him Edmund as naturally as if they were his friends. It was only later that I came to realise that Edmund was in any case a very private man, whom very few knew well, however much familiarity there was on the surface. I certainly never got to know him well, except as teacher and as colleague, but there was much joy to be had there, if one was...
not greedy for more.

I have mentioned his charisma as a teacher, but Edmund never simply charmed or excited. He worked at teaching very hard indeed, and he left me and others with an indelible image of the ideal lecturer and supervisor. His lectures, though often carefully written, came over with remarkable spontaneity, and were a rare mixture of clarity and excitement. He applied the same incisiveness of mind to technical problems of communication as he did to theoretical issues. His diagrams of Australian kinship systems, for instance, were masterpieces of blackboard work, using different coloured chalk to bring the unintelligible criss-crossings of the printed page into sudden clear focus. His seminars were even better. He generated a keen sense of purpose in the group, and he produced a set of detailed stencilled minutes every week for the participants (see appendix)! His comments on one’s supervision essays were often detailed, and he read every word with care. In supervision itself he listened well, and unlike Omar Khayyam’s “doctor and saint”, he never left one feeling that one simply “came out of the same door as in I went”. Admittedly, he could sometimes be devastating. I remember waiting outside his room in the Museum for a supervision, and hearing him ask some poor student loudly and with aggressive incredulity “Do you really mean to say that you believe that people are born with a knowledge of good and evil?”. And he could be comic too. In an essay on the structure of Trobriand villages, I had described how “I first divided the population into males and females”. Even agnostic Edmund could not resist the marginal comment that “God had already done that” for me. More seriously, though, the hard work he put into teaching was a vital part of the effect he had on us. Through him, we felt what we were doing mattered, and that we mattered too.

As students in what is now the Prelim year, Edmund took us through a range of texts. Radcliffe-Brown’s “Structure and Function” was one of the first, and we were characteristically told that there were all sorts of things wrong with it, but we should absorb what it had to say before we moved on and left it behind. The Lent Term was spent on the Trobriand corpus. Edmund did not stint encouragement if one did something well. I can still recall the excitement and satisfaction of getting back an essay on Trobriand funerals and finding the comment that now I was “beginning to write like an anthropologist”.

Edmund supervised me through my first year in the subject, at first in a class of two and then on my own because he felt that my supervision partner and I did not fit well together. In my final year
he had research commitments which kept him out of supervision, but he kept a watchful eye on me and others, and it was clear that once one was his pupil, one was always his concern. In my final year, he once kindly took the trouble to tell me that Meyer Fortes had been pleased with my performance in a seminar. This was both encouraging and a great relief, since I had dug my heels in on some issue and had come away quite shaken from the experience of arguing with Meyer. When I came to think about research, I at first applied for funds to work in Ghana. Edmund, unsolicited and prophetically, wrote to tell me I should have some other irons in the fire, and suggested that I also try for a research fellowship in East Africa. He was always prepared to play this role of loyal and unobtrusive guardian angel for me, and many others of his pupils, even if, as sometimes, it caused irritation to his colleagues.

As a research student, and later as a young member of staff, my intellectual contacts with him were less frequent than I would have liked. I had hoped that he would supervise the writing of my dissertation, but he had forewarned involvement in African research, and he also began to be involved in King’s College. Yet he still somehow retained his interest and commitment as the years went by, despite his deepening involvement in affairs of academic state. I have few material mementoes from that time, mainly offprints and some letters, and some photocopied notes he circulated for discussion on points of theory. It was always exciting to get such circulated pieces, and it was typical of Edmund that he was quick to take advantage of photocopying and other new technology. One of his letters is highly typical of him in other ways. It opens with a frank statement of his own principled opposition to developments in which I was interested, and it closes with advice about the possibilities of getting there without his help. It was of course only through his complete integrity in both personal and more formal structural contexts, that he was able to write in this way without appearing devious or absurd.

It would be repetitive to continue much beyond this point. My last substantial academic encounter with him was as much a pleasure as my first. After chatting with him at the 1987 ASA conference, and later listening there to his discussion of “ethnography as fiction”, I was tempted to write a partly critical response to his remarks. I sent this to him for comment along with a suggestion that we might put the two pieces in Cambridge Anthropology.¹ His reply was brief, but as enthusiastic and positive as ever. I need scarcely add that for me and

many others his death has rent a gaping hole through which a very
cold wind blows.

Appendix 1
The following is a transcription of the Part II Seminar programme for
the Michælmas Term 1956, along with Edmund Leach's circulated
minute of the November 7th session. From the perspective of the
present, it is oddly self and other. Fleeting glimpses of things to come
are perhaps recognisable (but see the *caveat* concerning Griaule in the
text).

*Social Anthropology*

*Part II Undergraduate Discussion Class*

(Mr. Leach's Group)
The following notes indicate how I see this term's discussions
developing. Opening papers should be 30 to 40 minutes long.
4000 to 5000 words.

24th October: Wilson. Using Tylor *Primitive Culture* Chapters VIII-X;
Andrew Lang *Myth, Ritual and Religion* passim; and perhaps E.S.
Hartland *The Legend of Perseus* (3 Vols) give an account of the
anthropological view which treats of myth as a 'thing in itself' –
either an evolutionary trait which 'survives' from one stage of
society to another or a diffusionist trait which is spread from one
society to another. Try to be precise as to what you (or your
authorities) mean by 'myth'.

31st October: Woodburn. Using Harrison *Prolegomena to the Study of
Greek Religion*; ditto *Ancient Art and Ritual*; Lord Raglan *The Hero;
Malinowski 'Myth in Primitive Psychology' (in *Magic, Science and
Religion*); ditto *The Foundation of Faith and Morals* (Riddell Lecture)
propound the view that myth is essentially a 'charter for ritual' and
that 'ritual drama' and 'myth story' are essentially two aspects of the
same thing mutually self-perpetuating.

7th November: Abrahams. Confining yourself mainly to Dogon
material discuss the relation between myth and cosmology. Can we
say that all cosmologies necessarily contain mythical elements but
that these are essential since they place man and his society in
relationship with his environment? Main refs. are in bibliography to
G. Dieterlen 'Parenté et mariage chez les Dogon' *Africa* April 1956;
side glances at Durkheim (*Elementary Forms*) and Radcliffe Brown
would also be appropriate. For last see bibliography in Fortes (ed)
*Social Structure* pp. 266/7 items on 'Rainbow Serpent Myth' and 'The
Some Early Memories

Sociological Study of Totemism'.

14th November: Laredo. Confine yourself mainly to Ian Cunnison History on the Luapula, Rhodes Livingstone Papers No. 21 (1951). All peoples seem to construct stories about their own past which they think of as 'history'? Is there any difference between this kind of history and the 'myths' we have been discussing so far? Can we make any generalisations about this kind of history? Last week Abrahams was discussing how myth serves to give society a position in territorial space. Is myth also necessary to give position in chronological time?

21st November: Kawharu. 'Myth and Ritual in Polynesia'. Presumably the main usable sources are Williamson (edited by Piddington) and part of Best. Choose if possible some fairly limited material and try to show how the growth of anthropological theory has modified the interpretation that can be placed on this type of data. The earlier literature is thick with Polynesian myth entirely divorced from its context. Does putting it back into context help us to understand what it was all about?

28th November: Sackur. 'Conservative myth in changing society'. We have been arguing that to understand myth we must see it in its social context but what about written myths which become fixed in form? Do they become out of data? Or are they simply reinterpreted to fit the changing situation? Choose your own material but don't range too widely ... A.W. Watts Myth and Ritual in Christianity should give you something to think about, but don't get us lost in the higher intricacies of contemporary German theology.

5th December: Wijeyewardene. Your job really is to sum up. Have we in fact got anywhere? Does it give you any sociological insight into what is going on in your own country? To an outsider, it might seem that what Ceylon needs more than anything else is capital investment and economic development. Yet objectively, the economy seems to be quite stagnant and a quite disproportionate amount of intellectual interest seems to be devoted to the study of Sinhalese 'history', the revival of 'pure' forms of Buddhism, the rediscovery of the classical forms of Ayurvedic medicine, etc. These are sociological facts. Are you prepared to interpret them in the light of the discussion that has gone on through the term?

Finally I would suggest that everyone can with advantage have a look at Ernst Cassirer The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vol. II "Mythical Thought" (Yale U.P. 1955).
Wednesday Discussion Class. Mr Leach’s Group.

3rd WEEK. Abrahams’ objective was to look at the very rich material on Dogon cosmological myth from the viewpoint of Durkheimian theory. According to this theory, in its Radcliffe Brownian form, the relation between cosmological myth and nature is similar to the relation between origin myth and society. Abrahams had no difficulty in showing that the Dogon treatment of the material world (as evidenced in the design of homesteads, the lay out of fields and villages etc) is justified by the Dogon in terms of cosmological ideas; (everyone ought to read the chapter on ‘The Dogon’ in African Worlds.) But a problem arises when we ask ‘Just how much is the anthropologist justified in reading into this sort of thing? Griaule himself commenting on his Dogon material has said: ‘Beyond this totality of beliefs appears a logical scheme of symbols expressing a system of thought which cannot be described simply as myth. For this conceptual structure, when studies, reveals an internal coherence, a secret wisdom, and an apprehension of ultimate realities equal to that which we Europeans conceive ourselves to have attained.’ How much of this is Dogon? How much Griaule? As anthropologists, can we in fact distinguish between an enquiry into what Dogon think about ‘ultimate reality’ and a worry as to what we think about ultimate reality? Those who think there is no problem here might ponder on Chapter VIII of A.N. Whitehead Adventures of Ideas (1933).

The discussion ranged widely and included an attempt to apply Durkheim to the early chapters of Genesis. Here it was pointed out that it cannot be argued that myth has only one meaning, for it is manifest that the Genesis story has been given a great variety of different interpretations at different times and places. Sackur pointed out that independently of any particular interpretation of ‘symbolic’ or ‘allegorical’ meaning, the components of a myth are ordered in a certain logical structure which remains fixed. It is this logical structure which is the anthropologist’s chief concern. It was then suggested that what the anthropologist is trying to do ‘in general’ is to understand the consistencies that must exist in the different aspects of the behaviour of the group he is studying. It is not strictly the case that ‘verbal rituals’ (myths) exist to justify ‘non-verbal rituals’ (Malinowski’s argument). It is rather that it is the anthropologist’s presupposition that there must be consistency. If he can show that a structural principle which he detects in social life also recurs repeatedly in the associated myth, then he has a kind of verification that his analysis is ‘true’. This does not however imply that the people he is studying necessarily recognise this consistency between
myth and life. Sackur suggested that the degree to which such consistency is recognised might itself be a significant variable deserving study. The discussion only touched marginally on what are the essential elements in 'cosmological' myths. It was noted that Genesis I, besides establishing a dualistic universe (light/dark; above/below; good/bad; male/female etc.) also lays down a system of time reckoning. And clearly time reckoning is a most important aspect of the relationship between the social order and the natural order. The discussion might well have gone on to consider whether time reckoning must always be sanctioned by cosmological ideas and whether the concept (or concepts) covered by our word 'time' do not in fact represent in a very fundamental way the link between the 'social order' and the 'natural order'.

The discussion made it clear that cosmological myths may contain, by implication, 'number systems' which may reflect very fundamental structural principles. In particular 'duality' corresponds to symmetry and various forms of 'dual organisation', while 'triads', or any scheme of odd numbers, correspond to asymmetry and perhaps to a class structure (cf. M. Granet, *La Pensée Chinoise* (1950)). But the borderline where numerology ceases to be anthropologically significant and becomes mere mysticism is not easily determined.

Appendix 2

*Note on joking relations;* a text circulated by ERL in photocyto to members of staff and others in the mid-1960s.

The following lengthy note is intended to throw additional light on Radcliffe Brown's arguments about 'joking relations', 'avoidance relations' etc. Comments will be welcome. If the fog is increased I should like to know. E.R.L.

**Outline of a general theory of transactions**

a) When two individuals A and B are described as being 'in a relationship' of friendship, hostility, et al. to one another this is simply a summary description of the behaviour we expect to observe between them.

b) Such behaviour which 'manifests' relationship is always part of

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2 Though the content is a contribution to an on-going anthropological discussion the original manuscript also illustrates Edmund's enthusiasm for technology. He had bought a photocopier and the circulated note was scarcely legible. Hence perhaps, his reference to "the fog" (SDB).
a set of continuing transactions. A ‘gives’ something to B; B ‘gives’ something to A. The ‘gift’ may consist of a material thing like a Christmas card or a money wage, or it may be a service, or a flow of words, or simply a gesture. But the total transaction is always to some extent reciprocal. A’s initial action communicates something to B; B’s response communicates something to A.

c) The code by which such transactions convey meaning to the actors is a part of culture. When the anthropologist tries to understand the ‘meaning’ of culturally defined patterns of behaviour he is trying to ‘break the code’. What are the rules of such decoding procedures?

d) The first thing to understand is that the meaning of particular actions can never be inferred with certainty by a priori reasoning, but only by systematic comparison. The problem here is the same as that of discovering the meaning of an unfamiliar word in an unrecorded language ... you must observe carefully all the different contexts in which the word is used and then consider what these contexts have in common. In this way, for example, by closely observing the English you might reach the conclusion that the act of ‘shaking hands’ is a code element which is only meaningful to members of certain social classes, but that within those classes the meaning is something like: “you and I are social equals we can converse and eat together”. You could not possibly discover this meaning simply by guessing.

e) The second point of great importance is that transactional communications, like verbal communications, are frequently ambiguous when considered in isolation, but cease to be ambiguous when considered in context. For example, quite a number of dictionary words ‘mean’ both ‘x’ and ‘not x’. Thus cleft may mean either “to cut in half” or “to stick two parts together”. It is the context of use which will determine the actual meaning. So also in the context of behaviour the same aggressive action may in one context be considered an insult and in a slightly different context be ‘treated as a joke’. The difference between the insult and the joke in such a case depends upon the nature of the relationship between the actor A and the respondent B. If the relationship is a hostile one, the act is treated as an insult, if the relationship is friendly, it is treated as a joke. The distinction is subtle, but it is easy to think of actual examples.

f) The variety of things which can be said by means of verbal
communications is almost infinitely large and the same applies to non-verbal communications. Social anthropologists however are specially interested in 'system of relationship, statuses, roles' and if we confine our attention to this area of meaning then the problem of interpretation becomes manageable. Up to a point we can set up a scheme of logical distinctions.

Thus: the two individuals A and B may be

a) of equal and interchangable status;
   a.1) the relation may be cooperative . . . 'friends'
   a.2) ............... an opposition . . . . 'enemies'.

b) of unequal status, such that A is superordinate to B (or vice versa such that B is superordinate to A)/
   b.1) ............. cooperative . . . . 'B is submissive'
   b.2) ............... opposition . . . . 'B is hostile-rebellious'.

Here it deserves note that, just as acts of aggression may in certain contexts be 'treated as a joke' so that they become indications of friendship instead of enmity, so also acts of rebellion against a superior may in certain contexts be treated as 'ritual' so that they become indications of submission rather than of actual rebellion (see Gluckman Rituals of Rebellion in South East Africa).

g) The behaviours associated with relations of type (a) seldom present us with any difficulty. A gives to B exactly the same kind of 'thing' that B gives to A.... christmas card, a glass of beer, an invitation to dinner... the direct reciprocity is a direct indication of the equivalence of status. The only difficulty is to distinguish precisely the kind of relationship which evokes behaviour which is overtly hostile but 'treated as a joke' and therefore as a sign of friendship.

The point is of course that 'friends' are persons who share common interests, and 'enemies (rivals)' are also persons who share common interests; enmity islatent in every bond of friendship. If hostile acts are sometimes treated as friendly acts, this is a measure of the value that is placed on the shared interest as against the individual interest.

h) The behaviours associated with relation to type (b) are much less straightforward. We distinguish this type by observing that what A gives to B is different from what B gives to A. But what is the significance of this asymmetry? Consider first a particular case:

In England, the giving of money ordinarily indicates superiority of status, e.g.
an employer is superior to an employee
a customer is superior to a shopkeeper
a benefactor is superior to those who receive his benefactions.

Consistent with this we note that, in cases where the status of the money-giver is not self evidently superior to that of the money-receiver, the act of giving the money is disguised. Professional men (lawyers, doctors, architects, etc) are practically never paid cash for individual transactions, the account is discretely settled through some secretarial third party. Indeed, a barrister (the highest status type of professional man) is specifically excluded from having any direct financial transactions with his clients, all payments pass through the solicitor.

It is easy to see what is happening in such cases. Money payments are serving two distinguishable purposes
i) the payment settles an economic obligation
ii) the payment expresses a status distinction, the superiority of the payer over the payee.

When these two purposes are mutually inconsistent the transaction is put out of sight. The fact that a payment is NOT made publicly to someone is here an expression of respect for the status of the individual who is NOT paid!

The logic of what anthropologists refer to as 'avoidance' relationships is very similar. But again note the possible ambiguity. 'non-action' may denote either 'non-relationship'
or 'intentional avoidance'.

'Intentional avoidance' in turn may, according to context, be interpreted as an insult or as a form of respect.

i) To return to the more general case, the puzzles of interpretation arise when a single transaction is required to 'express' several different meanings at the same time.

Consider a case from the matrilineal Trobrianders. The verbal category *tabu* among the Trobrianders is used reciprocally. It includes both males and females.

Among others, a man addresses as *tabu*:
  i) his father’s mother
  ii) his father’s sister
  iii) his father’s sister’s daughter.

Since the term is used reciprocally the transaction of 'giving' this term of address might seem to imply some kind of equality of status. And indeed all the girls whom a man can properly marry fall
into this category including the father’s sister’s daughter.

At the same time Trobrianders express a strong verbal disgust at the thought of having sex relations with an old woman. Since a man can marry a *tabu* he might marry his father’s mother but, to a Trobriander, this would be just ridiculous. But it is a good deal less ridiculous to suggest that he might marry his father’s sister. Although a man never does in fact marry a father’s sister, the possibility is a source of teasing, small boys are told that they will have to marry their aunt (Malinowski *Sexual Life of Savages*, 3rd Edn, pp.450-451).

It will be seen that this ‘joking relationship’ does not involve latent hostility, it rests simply on logical inconsistency. The father’s sister is an older woman and therefore deserving of sexual respect but she is also a *tabu* and therefore a marital possibility.

Several of the cases by which Radcliffe Brown exemplifies the theme of joking relationships between grandparents and grandchildren (*Structure and Function* pp.96-101) are very similar to this Trobriand example, but they are not I think very clearly presented.

j) One of the difficulties of Radcliffe Brown’s treatment is that he lumps together *this* kind of joking, in which the ‘joke’ is rather like a pun, with ‘privileged familiarity’ between mother’s brother and sister’s son in cases where the ‘joking’ consists of acts of overt aggression. It deserves note also that Radcliffe Brown had two rather different theories about this kind of privileged familiarity, the first is given in Chapter 1 of *Structure and Function* and repeated at the top of p.98. The second and better argument is that given at the bottom of p.98. An argument which is slightly different from either of these derives from Levi-Strauss *L’anthropologie structurale* p.54;

A marriage is a transaction which establishes a relationship between two men in relation to one woman... the husband/wife on the one side, the brother/sister on the other. The incest rule precludes the possibility that these two relations shall coincide. Therefore husband/wife ‘is the opposite of’ brother/sister. If we extend the argument to the next generation then father/son is (in a precisely similar sense) ‘the opposite of’ mother’s brother/sister’s son. If then the structure requires that a man

‘pays respect to his father’ he must
‘pay disrespect to his mother’s brother’.

If the structure requires that he

‘pays respect to his mother’s brother’ he must
‘pay disrespect to his father’.
Yet father and mother's brother are both alike members of the senior generation so that he must pay respect to both in either case. The inconsistency here is of a different kind from that considered in para (i) though it is in some ways analogous. It is also analogous to the 'ritual of rebellion' behaviour considered in para (f) under (b.2). The disrespectful behaviour is, as Radcliffe Brown points out, asymmetrical. The asymmetry reflects the difference of generation but, as in a 'ritual of rebellion', reverses the behaviour which would ordinarily be expected between a senior and a junior. It thus expresses respect and disrespect simultaneously!

k) In my view, Radcliffe Brown (Structure and Function pp.98-99) was in error in eliding this kind of behaviour which clearly masks a relationship of considerable strain with the 'relationship of simple friendliness relatively free from restraint' (op.cit. p.97) which frequently characterises the relations between grandparents and grandchildren. The grandparent/grandchild relationship (when it has this easy-going quality) is a reciprocal relationship (as noted by Radcliffe Brown p.96). The logic in this case is the simple formula: “Things that are opposite to the same thing are similar to one another”. Grandparent and grandchild are both ‘opposite’ to the intermediate parent.

l) It should be noted that Goody in J.R.A.I., Vol. 89 (1959) puts a different interpretation on similar customs as they are found in a West African context. The moral of this is that implied in para (d); behaviour codes are particular to particular societies. Comparisons between one society and another are often illuminating but they never provide certainty. If we know the meaning of a word in Sanscrit or Latin this may help us to guess the meaning of a similar looking word in Ancient Greek, but the guess may be wrong. The cross-cultural comparison of behaviour codes is open to similar objections.