

Religion

KANAFANI-ZAHAR, AÏDA. *Le mouton et le mûrier: rituel du sacrifice dans la montagne libanaise* (Coll. Ethnol.-Controverses). 174 pp., illus., plates, bibliogr. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999. 149 FF

This is an excellent reflection on the complex relations obtaining between sheep, white mulberry trees, and silkworms in a tightly knit system of production and symbolic meaning in the traditional countryside in Lebanon.

Meat from the fat-tail sheep was the principal staple of the winter months. The meat, itself heavily laced with fat, was cooked in fat from the tail and put up as a conserve. What particularized this practice was that during the last months before being slaughtered the sheep were force-fed by hand by the family women. The closely reasoned argument of the author is that this created affective bonds between the women and the animals, giving rise to feelings of guilt and sadness when the latter were butchered, especially since the animal had by that time become doubly dependent on humans, through castration to begin with, then having lost contact with other sheep through force-feeding. Five meals a day, with the final handfuls being forced on the sheep after signs that it is no longer hungry, did away with contact with a flock, normal behaviour for the ovine races.

Food for the sheep was mostly grain, but mulberry leaves furnished an important part of the diet. The daily ration comprised not only fresh leaves but also those that had passed through the digestive tracts of the worms, and this mixture of worm excrement and chopped-up mulberry leaves supplied essential elements to counteract the imbalances induced by the force-fed diet without fresh grazing. The time of the year for force-feeding sheep was the same as that during which silkworms are led through the various pupal stages from eggs to cocoons. Women carried out both these activities, and the author underlines certain symbolic similarities between the two enterprises, among others the importance of the colour white, the white of the worms and cocoons, the white of pure mutton fat.

It might appear on the face of it that linking silkworms and force-fed sheep because both eat mulberry leaves is slightly contrived: this is not true. The relation is strong, for not only are the animal and the insect integral parts of the same system of production, they are both transformed into dependent creatures needing intensive and individual care. The importance of the cash crop of silk thread and of the food reserves for the winter of mutton preserves is underlined by the rich harvest of

proverbs and rituals attached to the products. The author highlights the role of women in these two activities, and remarks that in both cases it is a question of highly individualized and intensive care, of which one of the results is the creation of affective links between the human and the animal, if not between the human and the insect.

At the very beginning of the cycle there is a choice to be made of the animal to be fattened. Not all sheep are appropriate, and traditionally they often came from as far away as the Anatolian plateau, passing through the hands of several intermediaries before reaching the Lebanese mountains. These sheep could be relatively expensive and it is interesting to note the resemblance between the method used to allow land-poor peasants to cultivate trees and the one in use for force-feeding sheep: the poor farmer would acquire two sheep and raise one for a rich family, the straw and grain being provided by the latter.

The sheep having become, as it were, a member of the household can then hardly be slaughtered as if it were merely one of the animals raised to be eaten. In addition, not only is it a question of rupturing an affectionate bond which has grown up between the sheep and the women and children, but also that the treatment which the sheep has received has rendered it akin to a human being, so that its slaughter raises psychological and religious problems. The rituals that surround the butchering transform this latter into a sacrifice, thus legitimating it. It is interesting to note a certain osmosis between Christian and Muslims in interconfessional villages at the symbolic level of what are licit and what are illicit food practices.

At each step in the logical presentation of the research, many avenues are explored and noted, so that not only is this particular phenomenon tied into the surrounding cultures of the Middle East, but a future student in this area is also pointed down possible roads to travel, with the aid, I might add, of an excellent and abundant bibliography.

ROBERT CRESSWELL

CNRS, Paris

RAPPAPORT, ROY A. *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity* (Cambridge Stud. soc. cult. Anthropol.). xxiii, 535 pp., bibliogr. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1999

This book is more than an academic treatise. As Keith Hart puts it in an impressive foreword (p. xiv), Rappaport is attempting 'nothing less than to lay the groundwork for the development of a new religion adequate to the circumstances humanity will encounter in the twenty-first century'. Scientific detachment is a luxury we can no longer afford. If

we are to avert environmental and social collapse, the spell of monetarism must be broken. 'If money becomes the standard by which all value is assigned and compared', writes Rappaport (p. 454), 'then it itself becomes *ipso facto* the highest of all values'.

Such a stance amounts to 'Idolatry' – defined as the elevation of contingent, self-serving priorities to the status of Ultimate Concern (p. 455). Entailed also is the 'Diabolical lie' – falsehood which not only masquerades as truth, but tampers with our capacity to suspect any difference. Enhanced success in such manipulation stems from 'the increasing ability of ever smaller groups of men and ever more specialized, powerful and wealthy institutions to control the flow of ever greater volumes of information more comprehensively and the disposition of increasing concentrations of energy more totally' (p. 449).

What, then, is the solution? Rappaport falls short of advocating anti-capitalist class war. Instead, he offers religion. As against the notion that every principle has its price, humanity must reaffirm that fundamental premise of all viable, stable religious communities – namely, that *some things are sacred*. To this end, we must transcend ordinary politics as a framework for action. Rappaport proposes working towards a new, planet-embracing moral and liturgical order by progressively *sanctifying* popular resistance to the idolatrous globalization onslaught. Constructing its own truths, this future replacement of religion is envisaged as an activist version of postmodern science (pp. 456–61).

Rappaport acknowledges that, speaking objectively, nothing is sacred. If collective resistance is to be sanctified – its ritualized modes of expression rendered non-negotiable, unquestionable – there is only one way to do it. Global action must become so coordinated, synchronized, and performatively decisive as to prove foundational in the sense in which, say, the Holy Mass is foundational to Christians. '*In the beginning was the Word*'.

The 'Word' central to traditional liturgies may typically appear, to an outsider, circular to the point of meaninglessness. An example is the Jewish *Shema*: '*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One*'. In a fascinating discussion (pp. 263–71), Rappaport explains that precisely through lack of external reference, such Ultimate Sacred Postulates are able to express social commitment, regular incantation guaranteeing the reliability of less exalted words central to discourse among the faithful. Their very meaninglessness is what enables such verbal formulae to survive unchanged down the generations, guaranteeing the reliability – hence meaning – of language as a whole.

Rappaport acknowledges that in the contemporary global context, the incantations

specific to, say, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam no longer seem authoritative. Mobilizing at most sectional commitment, they must be replaced. Where Rappaport differs from secular radicals is in proposing some new Ultimate Sacred Postulate to be adopted by humanity as a whole. Prioritizing not profit but the needs of the ecosystem, the chosen incantation should form the centre-piece of a new world order operating within parameters established by the palaeolithic founders of symbolic culture.

Rappaport died before he could become acquainted with performance-based environmentalist movements such as 'Reclaim the streets'. Would he have approved of such anarchic currents, whose incantations – together with those of sister movements in Seattle, Prague, and across the world – have so spectacularly impeded the 'Idolatry' of bodies like the World Trade Organization? Temperamentally conservative, he may have felt ambivalent to say the least. But my criticism is not of Rappaport's political sympathies, naïve and incongruous as these may often seem. I fully agree with his central notion: if humanity and the ecosystem are to survive, we must re-establish – contrary to capitalism – that not everything is saleable. *Some things are sacred*. An appropriate, hopefully complementary, proletarian point of departure would be the Ultimate Sacred Postulate of the labour movement – the ritual inviolability of the picket line.

If this book ultimately fails to enthrall, it is not, then, through lack of passion or moral commitment. It is because the opening fanfare of world-changing claims is hardly matched by intellectual work on the anticipated scale. Rappaport's palaeoanthropology is frankly amateurish and unlikely to make much impact. Most of these pages have been gathering dust for rather too long. Indeed, the whole volume is a somewhat verbose elaboration of the author's much earlier book, *Ecology, meaning and religion* (Richmond, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1979). The ethological and palaeoanthropological references today seem dated to the point of quaintness.

Rappaport's tragedy, it seems to me, was not only to have died before he could properly revise and complete his great work. His misfortune was also to have missed out on those exhilarating developments in evolutionary biology (including game theory and signal evolution theory) which might have lent lasting credibility to his project. Like so many of his humanist colleagues, he misconstrued the 'selfish gene' revolution in the life sciences as an ideological, monetarist celebration of economic selfishness, hence of precisely the 'Idolatry' he so understandably despised. Labouring under this misapprehension, he followed developments in evolutionary biology only until the mid-1970s, whereupon he seems to have turned his back on the

whole field. The book under review cites V.C. Wynne-Edwards on animal dispersal in relation to social behaviour – written in 1962 and nowadays endorsed by no one – but excludes Hamilton, Trivers, Dawkins, Zahavi, and just about every scientist who has transformed the intellectual landscape over the past three decades.

Such selective myopia might seem acceptable in a narrowly social anthropological book on ritual. But Rappaport's treatise, in his own words, concerns 'the evolution of humanity and humanity's place in the evolution of the world' (p. 1). His central argument is that 'in the absence of ... religion, humanity could not have emerged from its pre- or proto-human condition' (p. 1). Religious concepts are claimed to have an 'adaptive significance' (p. 2). They are generated through 'ritual', defined by the author in a manner which 'encompasses not only human rituals, but also those stylized displays reported by ethologists to occur among the birds, the beasts and even the insects' (p. 25). The book, then, asks how and why distinctively human rituals and associated beliefs emerged out of the antecedent *biological* behaviour of our evolutionary ancestors.

In addressing such issues, Rappaport flatly repudiates contemporary Darwinism, dismissing in the process virtually the entire corpus of primatological, archaeological, and palaeoanthropological recent scholarship on human evolution. At the end of his book, Rappaport makes clear why he took this course. His final lines thunder in condemnation of what he terms the coercive, self-serving ideology of *Homo economicus* – a cost/benefit obsession which he conflates directly with 'the obsessive focus on reproduction attributed to individuals by evolutionary biologists' (p. 461).

Certainly, Rappaport himself cannot be accused of any such focus. In the index to this formidable, 535-page book, neither 'sex' nor 'reproduction' (nor, indeed, 'women' or 'gender') feature at all; and not only the terms – the topics themselves are simply blotted out. Rappaport's personally recommended new religion, then, would appear to be as liberated – both sexually and intellectually – as its Judaic and other patriarchal prototypes. How an academic these days can write about human evolution without mentioning sex or gender is anyone's guess, but of course Rappaport is not the first (see, for another example, Ingold's *Evolution and social life*, Cambridge, 1986). Anthropologists who deliberately blot out sexual conflict from their models puzzle in the same way as historians who blot out class conflict. In a divided world, prophets who include harmony among their initial assumptions are surely those least likely to establish it as an attainable goal. It is conceivable that a future scientific revolution

may enhance human self-understanding, improving our chances of a sustainable future. No such breakthrough is embodied in this deeply ideological book.

CHRIS KNIGHT

University of East London

SUNDKLER, BENGT & CHRISTOPHER STEED.
A history of the church in Africa (Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia 74). xix, 1232 pp., maps, bibliogr. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 2000. £85.00 (cloth)

Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed's all-encompassing overview of the development of the Christian church across the entire continent of Africa is of interest to those whose interests touch upon issues of African Christianity. The grand scope of the work means that it is inevitably lacking in depth of historical and ethnographic detail in some areas, but this is partially offset by the sensitivity of the account, personalized as it is by the authors' long experience with African churches, as missionary and Lutheran bishop of Bukoba in Tanzania.

Beginning in the first century AD, Sundkler and Steed remind us that Christianity is not a European religion but an Eastern one. The first section of the book thus provides an interesting but brief history of the early Coptic Church in Egypt, North Africa, and Ethiopia. The narrative then takes us to the fifteenth century, when European navigators landed along the coasts of Africa, making contacts with coastal people and initiating small Christian communities. 'While Islam came by camel caravan – "ships of the desert" – Christianity arrived by sailing ship.' We are then led step by step through the nineteenth century, the colonial period and finally to the independent Africa of the late twentieth century, in every region of the continent.

The authors state at the beginning their aim to write a truly African church history, rather than the kind of detailed mission history that has already become familiar. Thus, throughout the book they focus on the role of indigenous Africans in carrying the church message to their fellows. Whether these were freed slaves, traders, refugees, returning migrant labourers, or the armies of mission-trained African catechists, they argue that the Christianization of Africa was in fact a movement spearheaded by Africans themselves and not simply a Western imposition. They even go so far as to suggest as a rule that whenever a European missionary ventured into newly 'discovered' areas expecting to be the first to bring the Christian message to the heathen, he never was first. Rumours from afar had already prepared the way and there was usually a group of young men who had