

5 Archaeology, Ethnography And Cosmology: Part 1

Owain Mason (<mailto:owainm@btinternet.com>)

Limitations of interpretation and ethnography

European prehistory presents a number of challenges to the archaeologist. These difficulties come not from a paucity of evidence (Thomas 1991:2), but rather from defining what evidence is significant and then the interpretive frameworks that archaeologists employ. When looking at cosmology (Note 1) the difficulty in constructing interpretations becomes apparent. Understanding cosmological ideas is particularly difficult without textual or iconographic representation (Pearson and Richards 1994:38). Additionally modern cosmological ideas often bias the way archaeologists interpret and conceptualise prehistoric cosmologies, as a person's existing knowledge greatly influences the way that they act and shapes how impressions are interpreted and given meaning (Renfrew and Bahn 2000:394).

Twenty-first century cosmological ideas in the West are largely influenced and shaped by scientific and social developments of the past century or so. Key among modern Western conceptual developments is the increasing predominance of the individual person over the individual person (Fowler 2004:17). The individual, to generalise, is a composite being, constructed by many influences (ibid). Individuals can be defined as a singular entity, where a persistent personal identity (ibid:8) takes precedence over relational identities (ibid), a key component of individual personhood. Modern Western social and scientific influences were absent in prehistory so therefore the way prehistoric Europeans thought and interpreted the world was radically different and their cosmological ideas would also have been dissimilar. This leads Richards to perceive the prehistoric past as an alien entity (Richards 1996:171). Attempting to deal with this issue represents a major challenge to archaeologists.

It has long been recognised that ethnography presents a useful starting point to understand the lifestyles of the past. Ethnographic studies can be utilised as an alternative method of conceptualising the past in a non-Western way. Extant traditional societies' are often categorised as non-industrialised and influenced by a number of different perceptions. In Melanesia the concept of individual forms an important component in social systems, where elements of the person (either in the form of substances or objects) are given as gifts; developing a chain of reciprocal relationships and forming social links across the island.

Ethnographic studies of cosmology

Ethnographic studies have only in the past forty years or so begun to consider the use and ordering of space as opposed to only social systems and material culture. For archaeologists like Pearson (1996:117) such studies present an interesting tool in attempting to unravel ideas about the conceptualising of space in the past at both the domestic and larger scale. In traditional societies' it is possible to see an alternative set of cosmological principles where concepts such as directionality and orientation come together to form a complex system

of categorization (Richards 1996: 171). These classifications come to express and embody a host of meanings relevant to the individual or community. The concept of metaphor often plays a crucial role in the way societies come to understand the world and can be seen in a number of ethnographic studies. The following two studies will be considered in this article:

- Pierre Bourdies' study of the Berber household (2000)
- Colin Richards' study of the Balinese compound (1996)

The Berber Household: Metaphors and embodiment

The Berber household via its architecture incorporates a number of metaphors and acts as a microcosm of the world (Bourdieu 2000:498). Houses can also not only embody universal ideas, but also personal concepts and the ideology of social orders (Pearson and Richards 1994:6). Objects can also come to embody these ideas and acquire certain roles and status (Note 2). Within the Berber household the loom embodies a number of roles including the protector of the house, representing one component of a complicated system of metaphor that forms the Berber cosmology. One of the central tenets of this cosmology is the interplay between light and dark – reflecting ideas of order and chaos – which is further reinforced by the association of particular items with these zones. Man made items and other processed items tend to be associated with the light, whilst the dark represents the untamed, natural elements. Architecturally the layout of the house plays out this concept, with the house divided into two general zones: the area for the animals in the dark and the area for the humans in the light. A similar scaling down of the world can be seen in the Balinese compound.

The Balinese Compound

Richards in his study of the Balinese compound (1996) identified a distinct set of cosmological ideas based around the Balinese cardinal points. These cardinal points represent particular values which are attributed according to their geographic position. North is related to the sacred mountain in the North of the island and is associated with the gods and the ancestors the most sacred aspects of the Balinese world. The southern point is associated with the sea – home of the dead and monsters. Additional points, East and West, are added from Hindu beliefs; the East being associated with rebirth and sunrise, whilst the West is linked with death and the sunset. The cardinal points can also be coupled to form additional points such as North East' which combines sunrise/rebirth/ new life with the sacredness of the north.

Divisions within the Balinese compound mirror these cosmological orderings. The compound is divided into distinct zones representing the scared (North) and the profane (South). Activities undertaken in these areas are also linked to their cosmological status. Take, for instance, kitchen activities. Kitchen activities take place in the South-western corner – the most profane section – due to their association with death and pollution in the form of blood (Richards 1996:178). The middle zone of the house is a transitional zone, reflecting the geography of the island and the position of the Balinese people. Most Balinese people live within the middle of the island in between the sacred and profane. This

area becomes a transitional zone as it reflects the human before its last journey at death. Upon death the body and soul make their way to their respective domains, the soul to the mountain and the ashes to the sea. Domestic space acts again as a microcosm for Balinese views about the life of the body becoming more sacred over time and, with death, the most sacred part detaching from the profane element. Activities that take place within the middle area of the house (the Bele Gede) reflect this transitional nature: it is the place where boys achieve manhood. Older members of the house reside in the more northerly section, as age is associated with wisdom. Beyond them in the North-eastern corner is the family altar (Pameradjan): the most sacred aspect of the house.

It becomes readily apparent that the cosmological principles of the Balinese household encompass a whole variety of ideas from birth to death; each having its own ritual and place in the house, reinforcing the idea of the house as a microcosm for the world as a whole. The village layout too incorporates such ideas with burials confined to the south and religious buildings to the north (Richards 1996:180). We can see that cosmological ideas operate at three levels: the domestic, the communal and the geographical. Journeying through the house one is channelled into the south and one gradually progresses from here to the North-west and the Pameradjan. This journey reflects the passage through life, starting as profane and working towards sacredness in old age and then in death. As in the Berber household, the Balinese compound is host to a complex array of ideas reflecting the overall cosmological views of the Balinese.

In the next part of this article we will look at the role of studies such as these in archaeological interpretation, and the overall usefulness of ethnography in understanding prehistoric cosmology.

Notes

1. Cosmology, the principles that govern spatial arrangements, can operate on a number of levels. Such concepts can affect the individual, the household or even operate at a monumental level. Cosmological values can also become bound up in the routine of daily life. For this discussion the term cosmology will be employed to refer to spatial arrangements and their impact at a domestic and monumental level.
2. For more on metaphors and material culture see Tilley, C (1999) *Metaphor and material culture* Oxford: Blackwell

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