

Devaluing local concepts: Elmdon from village to commuting centre

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Abstract. Anthropologist Audrey Richards does not appear to value the use of the concept of real Elmdon to maintain village identity in the village of Elmdon. I make a proposal about why it makes sense to devalue this use, aside from the liberal respect for individuals that Richards suggests.

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It must be a wicked witch

Who makes the flowers itch

Anthropologists who turned their attention to the more local setting of the Essex village of Elmdon, in the 1960s, found that a concept unfamiliar to many outsiders is used there: the concept of real Elmdon. The paradigmatic case of a person who is regarded as real Elmdon is a person born of one of the families long associated with the village and who still lives in the village.

Now the image of the anthropologist in various other disciplines is that they are a cultural relativist. If they find that a certain framework of concepts is used to make sense of the world in a given society, they say that this framework is acceptable for the people who use it – they do not dispute it. But anthropologist Audrey Richards, who owned a cottage in Elmdon and encouraged the project of students doing fieldwork there, challenges the use of “real Elmdon” as described above. Below I shall look into reasons for challenging it.

Here is a quotation from Richards:

The problem which has been nagging at me is the question of what made some Elmdoners identify with their own village; feel they have prescriptive rights to housing and other amenities; and that they, or some of them, are the “real” Elmdon people whereas immigrants, of whatever class, stock-keepers or stockbrokers, are different and without the same rights and should not really be there. (Richards, quoted in Strathern 1981: 16)

As stated, her reason seems liberal. If you live in a place, you should not be treated as a second-class citizen there.

I can conceive of a situation in which it makes sense to devalue the use of real Elmdon in the exclusive way described, which is not first and foremost about liberal concern for the equal rights of individuals. I was stimulated by the anthropology book on Elmdon quoted above to conceive the situation, but I have no special confidence that it applies here. Nevertheless, the situation conceived is probably relevant for somewhere and for convenience of expression I shall write as if it applies there. The author of the main body of the book, Marilyn Strathern, tells us:

Elmdon in the 1960s was crucially different from what it had been a hundred years before: in class and occupational terms it could no longer be described as a pyramid. There were few tradesmen or craftsmen left, and middle-class incomers had taken over only certain aspects of these persons’ positions... But if an indigenous middle class had gone, indigenous workers were still there, many in their traditional occupations on farms. (1981: 24-26)

I imagine a middle class arose within Elmdon and respected its structure and identity, but was subject to pressures that caused this class to no longer exist there. There were people who did not think it was a great problem losing them, or else that they must always take the pressure of various situations and would always take that. But they perform some function of value for the village as a whole, call it “Function X.” Now function X has to be performed by newcomers. But you cannot attract the newcomers needed with the emphasis on an exclusive real Elmdon – that is a reason for devaluing this emphasis and it is not, first and foremost, about liberal concern for individual rights. It is about concern for the community as a whole. Of course, the complaint now is “Elmdon isn’t really a village at all, it’s just a commuting centre” (Oxford 1981: 209). That is the price people have to pay for mishandling earlier situations. They don’t get an intentionally-maintained communal identity now.

I would like to add that all this can happen while not being very clear about what the function of X is, and indeed is more likely to happen then. I think one can sometimes be confident that one person is dependent on another for some “stuff” while not being very clear on certain details, notably why that stuff matters. It is as if there is a long list of ingredients and a lot of the ingredients in smaller proportions, which many people would not think to put in, come from that other person. It is difficult to do much with only the stuff these people would put in.

Reference

Strathern, M. (with a foreword by A. Richards and an epilogue by F. Oxford). 1981. *Kinship at the core*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.