

## **Disappearing ranking systems and increasing sense of inequality in Elmdon**

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*Abstract.* I address a puzzle identified by the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern in her text on the village of Elmdon: that a disappearing ranking system has actually led to an increasing sense of a division, between the haves and the have-nots in the village.

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*Learning the concept of a squire*

*With ever expanding empire*

The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern presents a potentially paradoxical situation concerning the village of Elmdon:

Paradoxically perhaps the vanishing of a precisely graded hierarchy, of the ranking of such positions as labourer, horseman, blacksmith, bricklayer, clerk, shopkeeper, has led to a greater sense of division between, in the words of one newcomer, “the haves and have-nots.”

No wonder Elmdoners say that housing was never a problem in the past for it is a problem today in a new way. It used to be accommodation; now it is property, an item which reflects how much money is spent. (1981: 95)

The problem would seem to be this: (1) If there is no precise ranking of vocations, people can relate to each other on more equal terms; (2) now there is no precise ranking of vocations; (3) nevertheless, people are not relating to each other on more

equal terms – there is a sense of increasing inequality.

I think that (1) needs to be qualified. People, or some people, can relate to each other on more equal terms in certain respects. There is no guarantee that they will relate to each other on more equal terms in other respects and it is an open question whether those are the most important respects.

Strathern omits the older character of the squire from the graded hierarchy in the quotation, but presumably in the days when the ranking system was more influential, the squire was also influential. And he owned a lot of land in Elmdon (1981: 53). Imagine a situation like this: the squire says, “You are a blacksmith family, so you get this house – this is traditionally the blacksmith’s house”; “You are a bricklayer family, so you get this house – this is traditionally a builder’s house”; and so forth.<sup>1</sup> That is how the squire allocates accommodation on his land. Nowadays if a house is on the market, there is no written or unwritten rule which says that it is only for people of such and such an occupation. The bricklayer and the blacksmith can both make an offer, assuming both have money. In that sense, they can relate to each other on more equal terms, especially if in the earlier situation one designated accommodation was worse than the other. There is an improvement in equality in that respect. But in practice of course you cannot genuinely offer if you do not have money.

Assume then that you cannot do much in the village without owning property.

A sense of inequality is likely to form around those who have sufficient money to

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<sup>1</sup> We are told, ‘When Audrey Richards moved into Elmdon in 1957, she created some resentment by buying what was described as having “always been a working men’s house.” In fact its nineteenth-century residents had included school teachers, a master carpenter, a wheelwright, policeman and latterly a farm worker from the Gamgee family, cousin of Wilkes’s foreman.’ (1981: 87) Robert Fiske Wilkes was the squire, from 1858 to 1879, the object of fond mythology. He apparently even dictated marriages for economic reasons (1981: 56).

own property and those who do not. The more money matters for doing things in the village, such as having employment there, and the less evenly distributed it is, the greater the feeling of inequality.

### **Reference**

Strathern, M. (with a foreword by A. Richards and an epilogue by F. Oxford). 1981.

*Kinship at the core*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.