

Surprise combined studies: something learnt from Elmdon anthropology

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Abstract. Do we learn anything from social anthropology done in more familiar settings, such as England? In this paper, I draw attention to something I learnt from Frances Oxford's commentary on Elmdon: a surprising combination. I also propose a solution based on a conception of labour and inheritance rights.

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Some droplets to delete

On a u-shaped metallic seat

Social anthropologists are famous for travelling to faraway exotic societies and telling us about the concepts, customs, and way of life there. What about if an English anthropologist studies an English village? A worry is that they will have nothing informative to say to their primary audiences. When teaching such anthropology, I have sometimes asked my students what they learnt and even keen students struggle to specify new things they learnt from a fieldwork report. But I wish to draw attention to something I learnt from anthropologists studying the village of Elmdon.

An epilogue by Frances Oxford left me puzzled by a combination. On the one hand, various Elmdoners use the concept of being real Elmdon. The paradigmatic case of being real Elmdon is being born into one of the families historically associated with the village and still living in the village. That would make one undoubtedly real

Elmdon – or beyond reasonable doubt, to be precise. Oxford, in a 1977 epilogue, also tells us:

Local people show little sentimental attachment to the houses in which they and their ancestors have lived for years. Their concern is to ensure an adequate supply of modern housing. This view contrasts vividly with that of many of the immigrants who want to preserve the old village, in its physical manifestation of cob and thatch, and do not want to see it “spoilt” by new building. (1981: 217)

This material challenges an assumption of mine. I assumed that the following qualities are generally found together:

- (i) A local values being real Elmdon, in relation to which the paradigmatic case is being born into one of the old families associated with the village and still living in the village.
- (ii) A local values the ancestral houses of Elmdon.

Instead there is (i) without (ii), with more value placed on modern houses instead.

If one thinks of (i) as motivated by community identity – the village is a community with an identity, which locals seek to maintain – then should not (ii) come along with it? Those houses are part of Elmdon identity. A speculative solution here is to propose that valuing real Elmdon is actually about valuing the labour that went into making the village. “Certain people, from certain families, put the work in to establish the village and so they should enjoy the fruits of their efforts – they should have privileges – as should their kin who remain in the village, as a matter of inheritance rights. The labour done by members of a certain family was not just done for themselves but for future generations of that family.” This view is compatible with not

placing too high a value on ancestral houses. They are very difficult to live in and maintain. “As a reward for what one’s ancestors did, it should be easy for a real Elmdoner to get a convenient modern house in the village.”

Reference

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