

## Who endorses the community first model in Elmdon? Two solutions

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*Abstract.* This paper responds to a paradox Marilyn Strathern raises concerning who endorses a community first model of the village of Elmdon, according to which it is a community and the good of the community should take priority over individual interests. It is middle-class newcomers, whose peripheral position requires greatest sacrifice from them, if the model is to be implemented. I propose two solutions to the puzzle.

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*“Scent an old puzzle?”*

*—Time to muzzle!”*

In her book based on fieldwork done in the village of Elmdon, Marilyn Strathern writes:

There seem to be certain similarities here with the ‘community model’ of the village held by middle-class newcomers – in spite of the paradox that the latter are peripheral rather than central to the power structure based on employer-employee relationships. (1981: 68)

What is the paradox here? Or what is the puzzle, if “paradox” is too grand a word? Strathern identifies two “models” of the village expressed in discourse (1981: 46-49), one of which describes it as a community and introduces the norm that the good of the community takes priority over individual interests – “the community first model,” I

call it. The second model describes it as a place of competing interests, such as the interests of established farmers versus newcomers. The puzzle seems to be why the following combination obtains?

- (1) The peripheral position of middle-class newcomers in the social structure of the village means that the implementation of a community first model requires greater sacrifices from them than others.
- (2) There is an alternative model available, of different groups or individuals with competing interests in one place.
- (3) It is the middle-class newcomers who espouse the community first model.

I shall propose two solutions to the puzzle. Both solutions depend on a premise – that total dominance of the community first model would be a bad idea. There are choices about which we do not want people thinking, “Is this best for the community? Then I shall do it. Otherwise not.”

*The moral solution.* If we think of established villagers as accepting this point and supposing that it is best for there to be a division of roles in what model is espoused, they quickly take the role of espousing the individualistic model, because it is easier. The newcomer feels that some individualistic behaviour is too great a risk for the village and so for moral reasons they ask, “What about the interests of the community as a whole?” If you so wish, you can think of them as motivated by a desire to avoid the sense of guilt if some negative consequences obtain, though I am not convinced any calculation is involved. (Given this thought and the role already taken up by established members, premise (1) may be misleading about the sacrifices. There are actually larger sacrifices for them if they avoid the community first model.)

In my experience, situations like this arise often, where one party takes up a

seemingly less responsible role and you end up taking the more moral role. For example, someone in your institution proposes bold but stupid ideas and you feel obliged to say, “Hey wait a minute, let’s be more careful here and think about the consequences.” (If I got stuck in this role enough, I would conclude that the message is: “If we want to do something stupid that crashes everything, just let us!”)

*The reward solution.* Middle-class newcomers are regarded as not caring especially for the village, merely caring for their own individualistic interests. But there is some reward for them if they can show that they care about the village as a whole community. By espousing the community first model, they are hoping to move from a less peripheral position in a structure to a more central position.

On this solution, proposition (1) above is misleading. The greater sacrifices are temporary. A more accurate statement of the situation would make this apparent.

## **Reference**

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