

“Writing the exotic”: a pastiche of Marilyn Strathern

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Abstract: This paper presents an attempted pastiche of the writing and thinking style of the distinguished anthropologist Marilyn Strathern. The claim about the consequence of avoiding the charge of exoticism resembles the paradox of analysis.

I suppose it is a break from academic norms to produce a pastiche and present it, but if you have done a lot of research on an influential academic, or comparable figure, and even developed a subversive interpretation, it is a natural next step.

Anthropologists have often been accused of peddling the exotic. The criticism is familiar from the revolution of the 1920s, which made a victim of Frazer’s anthropology. Critics held that Frazer selected his ethnographic details for their dramatic effect on the late nineteenth century readership (Gluckman 1965: 20). The criticism assumes the availability of some other way of selecting ethnographic details. Frazer omitted the mundane – the initiatory ritual is conveyed but not the commonplace routines of married life – but to select for it is still to engage in a construction of sorts: a different genre of drama.

The charges brought against earlier anthropologists are routinely brought against later ones. Ethnocentrism is the paradigmatic example. The revolution did not rid itself of the charge of exoticism. Functionalist anthropologists were said to represent societies as unchanging wholes, in the face of colonial and post-colonial transformations. The object of their descriptions was an Other, outside of global

systems of relations and frozen in time. My own research has repeatedly been brought to tribunal, for setting up a contrast between Euro-American models of individual and society and Melanesian alternatives.

Anthropology of course undergoes change. From Frazerian anthropology to structural-functionalism to postmodern trends, we seem to have travelled an immense distance. And yet anthropology remains dogged by the charge of exoticism. Persistent criticism displaces a portrait of change. Will the mushrooming of fieldwork in Britain solve the problem? I propose to disarm the charge by means of definition. When is an anthropologist writing the exotic? When anthropological premises about social life are not shared with the subject of study. Just about any informative anthropology would therefore lay itself open to the charge of exoticism. If one avoided the charge, one would run into the other accusation of having expended much energy only to uncover what we already know – studying people just like us.

Reference

Gluckman, M. 1965. *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.