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Dualism – A Motif of Thought in Sepik Societies

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The principle of dualism is one of the most important characteristic elements of certain Sepik societies. The following analysis attempts to describe aspects of the phenomenon of dualism in the cultures of this area. It should not be understood as a general survey of all dualistic forms in this rather complex setting of cultures.¹ Nevertheless the thesis might be proposed that the central Iatmul and adjoining central Sawos groups have developed a very complex structure of dualism which determines several spheres of the society. This structure is rather unique compared with the neighbouring groups of the Sepik and underlines the extraordinary position of these villages similar to their art and mythology.

Dualism in Sepik Societies

Different authors have given comparisons of dualistic forms in Sepik societies (cf. Mead 1971, Bateson 1958, Tuzin 1976, Rubel and Rosman 1978, Koch 1940). Karl Koch tried to make a general survey of the occurrence of moieties (“Zweiklassen”) and totemism in New Guinea. Probably the first detailed description of some elements of dual organization was presented by Richard Thurnwald for the society of Banaro. According to him, the cult house is divided longitudinally in two halves with two corresponding fireplaces. All clans are subdivided into two parts, a right and a left part. However, we find no mention of further dual principles in mythology or in social behaviour, other than that the moieties are interrelated through the marriage structure. Thurnwald explains

the existence of these moieties as resulting from fissions or fusions of social groups. The *mundu*-institution, a partnership relation between moieties, is explained as the survival of a former endogamous clan organization (Thurnwald 1921:137).

In her work Margaret Mead did not analyse the details of dualistic forms among the Mountain Arapesh. She was puzzled by some discrepancies and apparent contradictions of the system. Yet, she did indeed observe two forms of dual organization, one related with feasting and the other with initiation rituals. Mead remarked that the concept of moieties was difficult to understand. Nevertheless, we can find several details about moieties in her description. The difficulties in grasping the actual functioning and the irregularities of the moiety system reminded me of very similar experiences that I had during my field work among the Sawos.²

Among the Mountain Arapesh there are two groups of “hawk” and “cockatoo” and another grouping of *iwhul* and *ginyau*, which are the moieties of exchange partners. A correlation exists between both moiety systems, as the *ginyau* are said to taboo the hawk and the *iwhul* to taboo the cockatoo. The *iwhul* and *ginyau* are important for feasting, whereas “in initiatory ceremonies the kumun and kwain groups are seated separately” (Mead 1971:25). As a general description, Mead states that, “the Arapesh have two moiety sets which function differently, but which they tend to equate loosely and confuse. Whether these two moieties were originally one, whether possibly they were imported at quite different periods, or whether one was imported and one developed within their own social system, it is impossible to say” (1971:25).

Of some importance for my following arguments are her remarks on symmetrical behaviour: “The need to repay a good or a bad deed, ultimately to balance out the women married into one group by repaying the same number of women, the requirement that there should be two moieties who can continually repay each other. This theme of exact recompense either of good or of evil permeates every aspect of Arapesh culture. It is a favourite folklore theme; it crops up continually in their interpretation of natural phenomena, the northwest monsoon returning the southeast monsoon; if one blew strong, the other will blow strong” (Mead 1971:70).

From these remarks we can deduce that the dual system in this case is more than just a grouping of clans and other social units. It is part of a way of explaining things like natural phenomena; it is a motif of thought determining concepts of marriage and the interpretation of nature. As we can deduct from my data about Sawos society, this dualistic way of thinking has attained a rather high degree of sophistication in the Middle Sepik region.

Among the Abelam, all male members are divided into two groups called *ara*: “A man of one *ara* has his ceremonial partner in the opposite *ara*, whom he addresses as *wuna tsambøra*.³ This relationship is often handed down between lineages, and, hence, it has some affinity with the clan system. It is not possible, however, to obtain a consistent list of *tsambøra* in the terms of the latter. The general practice is for a man and his sons to be *tsambøra* to another man and his sons. The relationship is primarily an indi-

vidual one” (Kaberry 1940/41:256). Hauser-Schäublin (1984, 1987), who has done an extended fieldwork in the same area forty years later, points out that besides clans the ceremonial moieties are of importance cross-cutting partially the clans. They are endogamous and not totemistic. The moieties are in a strong competitive opposition trying to outdo the other side by enormous quantities of yam tubers and large pigs.

The dual division of the Abelam is closely associated with the yam and Tamberan cults, i. e. with feasting and initiation, comparable to the moieties of the Mountain Arapesh. The moiety system is related to competition and male prestige. In ritual life it has its expression in the display of yam tubers and the chanting of clan songs. The Abelam dual division, which is not totemic and does not regulate the marriage system, has other similarities with comparable aspects in neighbour societies. Yet we do not detect any mention of a dualistic view of the world or that the dual system is reflected in mythology and concepts about nature.

Comparable to the Abelam moieties is the dual division among the Urat, who live in the area west of the Abelam: “The groups are ritually opposed in ceremonial exchanges and in initiations into the secret men’s cult [...] The dual division deeply influences all aspects of village life, determining to a large extent relationships between people within the village, and links between villages” (Allen 1976:39). But as we have seen regarding Abelam moieties, there is no indication that this division is reflected in concepts about the world. The Kwanga, southern neighbours of the Urat people, have a very similar moiety system, which is interrelated with initiation and whose main function is the exchange of garden products and pigs. The moieties of the Kwanga, too, have no mythological or totemistic significance.

The most comprehensive analysis of dual structures in Sepik societies was made by Donald Tuzin among the Iahita Arapesh. He differentiates between three levels of functions: 1. totemic moieties, 2. non-totemic sub-moieties, and 3. initiation partnerships. The totemic moieties are named after the hornbill and the black cockatoo: “In cult matters, and in quasi-ritual contexts such as funerals and yam competition, the moieties are aggressively rivalrous” (Tuzin 1976:218). Common to all three levels of these moieties is their complementary character, derived from the model of the “elder brother/younger brother” relationship, which is not on equal basis. Tuzin (1976:301) proposes “[...] the hypothesis, [...] that the dual organization is [...] an adaptive response to tensions in the fraternal bond”. Tuzin maintains that the complex dual divisions of the Iahita Arapesh represent a response to demographic and historical events. At the beginning of this evolution he assumes “that these Arapesh possessed some form of rudimentary dual organization, probably featuring the regular exchange of women between exogamous local groups” (1976:320).

There is little information about the societies of the Upper Sepik. Alfred Gell presents a description of a moiety system in his monograph on the Umeda. In the Waina-Sowanda area each ritual role and each dance have a duplicate. Gell describes this as a symmetrical dualism: “[I]t is through the moiety opposition that the unity of

the village, which is only realized fully in performances of ritual, is given expression” (1975:33). Using the differentiation made by Gregory Bateson for Iatmul dualism (see below), Gell defines the dualism on the ritual level as symmetrical, while on the mythological level it is asymmetrical: “The myth posits a society based on the union of complementaries: nature and culture, insiders and outsiders, wife-receiver and wife-givers, agnatic continuity and matrilineal alliance” (Gell 1975:39). The mythological dualism is derived from the opposition of the coconut palm versus the Caryota palm, or male versus female.⁴ But the moieties have no “corporate attributes” (Gell 1975:42) and are not the exogamous units. Only in ritual do they become active as groups. Comparable to the case made by Thurnwald and Tuzin, Gell also tries to explain the moiety system as a historical result of population movements. This interpretation is based upon the identification of one moiety with the coconut palm, representative for “village”, continuous settlement and duration. Thus, we are led to recognize the dual division of the Waina-Sowanda area, the often described situation in which people make a difference between prior population and later immigration. As there will be inequality in rights to resources, such as land, this dual system tends to be rather asymmetrical.

For a large number of Sepik societies we have no data on the existence of a moiety system or dual divisions. Among these societies are the Heve, the Gnau, the Kwoma, the Yimar, and people around Amanab. I do not wish to explain the possible reasons of this distribution. Instead I would like to point out some aspects of dualism, which are not treated in detail by the authors mentioned above. When discussing moieties and dual divisions, emphasis is usually placed on the existence of social groups, their functioning and their relations to each other, to exchange systems and marriage rules. Thus, Tuzin states: “In contrast to the prevalence of dual *social* classification, a correspondingly throughgoing binomialism on the cosmological plane is generally absent in the Sepik” (1976:311). The only exceptions according to Tuzin are the following dichotomies: male/female, old/young; the right/left symbolism is not stressed. The following will demonstrate that this general statement by Tuzin does not correspond to the area of the Middle Sepik, where we have a very strong emphasis on binomialism that transcends the oppositions of male/female of elder/younger.

Dualism in the Middle Sepik

Gregory Bateson has tried to detect patterns or motifs of Iatmul thinking. For him Iatmul “culture as a whole appears as a complex fabric, in which the various conflicting ideological motifs are twisted and woven together” (Bateson 1958:235). He enumerates the more important motifs: pluralism, monism, direct dualism, diagonal dualism, seriation; both forms of dualism and seriation could be subsumed under one caption.

From my own discussions with informants in the Middle Sepik region, I got the impression that the conflict between pluralism and monism is of considerable weight

to them. For them as for the inquisitive foreign researcher there always remained the question of the puzzling multitude of ancestral figures. Sometimes they seemed to be only variations of one central being. This confusion (or multiplicity) is part of the strategy of big men to hide secret knowledge during their discussions on mythology in the men's houses. On the contrary, dualism as a principle of thinking is never a source of discussion or skepticism. Dualism as a structural element is known by Middle Sepik big men and never questioned.

Bateson recognizes “two forms of dualistic thinking”: direct or complementary dualism (“the relationship is seen as analogous to that which obtains between a pair of siblings of the same sex”) and diagonal or asymmetrical dualism (“the relationship is seen as analogy to that between a pair of men who have married each other's sisters”) (Bateson 1958:238). According to Bateson, direct or complementary dualism “leads to the formation of artificial relationships based upon brotherhood and to concepts such as that of the Iatmul that everything in the world can be grouped in pairs, such that in each pair one component is an elder sibling, while the other is a younger sibling of the same sex” (1958:239). Bateson claims that we have more difficulties in grasping the meaning of the other form of dualism (diagonal or symmetrical), because we do not recognize a dualistic principle in competition. “This diagonal way of thinking leads in Iatmul culture to the formation of artificial affinal relationships and to the idea that everything in the world has its equal and opposite counterpart. It is extended farther to the great dualistic constructs underlying the two moieties of Sun and Mother with their opposed totems Sky and Earth, Day and Night, and to the crosscutting dual divisions of the initiation system in which one half of one moiety initiates the diagonally opposite half of the opposed moiety” (Bateson 1958:239).

Certainly this is not the place to describe in detail all variations of Iatmul and Sawos dualistic thinking. The basic facts have been put forward by Bateson and others.⁵ A detailed description of dualism and its implications for a Middle Sepik society was given by Schuster in 1970 for the village of Aibom which is not Iatmul but still has a strong cultural similarity. One of the recent research works in the area, done in the village of Tambunum by Silverman, does not focus on dualism: “patrilines are bifurcated into two categories. But this division is far-removed from daily life and even, for many people, entirely unknown. There are *no* totemic moieties.” (2001:182). Nevertheless they have patrilineal initiation moieties named Miwat and Kiisiik, names which are also used for a dual ritual moiety in the Sawos village of Gaikorobi. Silverman (1996) also mentions that totemic disputes are common in the village of Tambunum, but he does not refer to the dualistic moieties in his discourse on debates. In this almost Lower Sepik village of the Iatmul dualism seems not to be dominant, at least not more at the end of the 20th century.

The Sawos Case of Dualism

Part of this dualistic thinking is the projection of oppositions on space and nature. Near the Sawos' village of Gaikorobi is located the forest area of Lami, which is one of the most sacred areas surrounding this village and which has been claimed by many other villages as the source of population movement. The tall trees give evidence that this forest is not used for gardening as other forests around the village. A small rivulet crosses the forest in an east-west direction, dividing the territory into a northern and southern section. The northern section of the forest is called 'Arasəlai' and is associated with the Mother moiety. The southern part is called 'Djigembit' and is linked to the Sun moiety. Now we can observe a correspondence between this local projection and the regional situation of the Middle Sepik people: the Sawos people living in the northern part, whereas the Iatmul populate the river banks of the Sepik to the south.

North	South
Arasəlai	Djigembit
Mother moiety	Sun moiety
Mother	Son or children
Sawos	Iatmul

The current of the small rivulet Lami flows from east to west. The upper part of the rivulet is called 'taknge' and is associated with the Sun moiety, the lower part with the Mother moiety. One could expect that the upper part should be linked with the Mother moiety. But Sawos informants explained that the source is not of importance for this kind of classification. On the contrary, the opposition above/below is decisive for this view. Of the two primeval brothers the one of the Sun moiety was the first to emerge, and "above" is always associated with light and, thus, with the Sun moiety. The lower part of the rivulet called 'kandənge', hence, is associated with the spread legs of women, with birth and with death.

The opposition of above and below not only relates to the classification of rivers, but also to concepts of space in general. Thus the pair of words "ambukambi" and "ngənikambi" (upper and lower part of any river) also expresses the location and orientation of men's houses in villages. Each men's house has a front (*ndama*) and a back (*ngumbu*) side. The front part should be oriented towards *ambu*, the back side towards *ngəni*. Not only the men's house but also the whole village ground plan has an inherent orientation. The village ground is thought of as being a crocodile with a head and a tail; the head of the crocodile directed towards the upper part of the river. Thus, we have the following correspondences:

	upper	lower
river	<i>ambukambi</i>	<i>nganikambi</i>
men's house	<i>ndamangio</i>	<i>ngumbungio</i>
village	<i>ambuwe</i>	<i>nganiwe</i>

The front side of a men's house is connected with the Sun moiety and the back side with the Mother moiety. This opposition can be compared with the aforementioned classification of upper and lower part of rivers.

The point that I would like to make here concerns the fact that in the Middle Sepik area these dualistic concepts are not only related to social organization, exchange, marriage system and initiation, as has been shown for other Sepik societies with dualistic divisions. Indeed, the dualism of Iatmul and Sawos embraces a much larger field of experiences. It is a way of thinking that classifies not only people, but also time and history, space and objects. The dual classification of the past is determined by myths about the origin of the world. In the beginning everything was shrouded in darkness. Therefore, it is called the period of the Mother moiety. Only later with the ascension of the sun and moon and with the origin of light and other important cultural innovations, did the Iatmul and Sawos recognize the existence of two moieties. When missionaries came and preached their versions of the Old and New Testament, people of the Middle Sepik readily accepted this dualism of the two books and integrated them into their own concepts. They compared it with their own classification of the past, with times of darkness and of light, or with the time period before and after the arrival of Europeans. Similarly, the two stages of Papua New Guinea independence (self government and independence) were understood along this dualistic line of thought.

The left/right opposition has its main expression on the mythological level. We can find this opposition in myths about the origin of earth. Two turtles create the earth and are transformed into small serpents, which are called right and left bullroarer. Another myth tells how the two male ancestors Malumban and Kuvumban were created. Kuvumban was created on the right side and Malumban on the left side. Therefore, Sawos informants compare the left arm or side of the body with the elder brother Malumban, the right arm with the younger brother Kuvumban. As often mentioned, today the right arm is the strong one, so that one can throw spears with it. The left arm belongs to the elder brother, who has retired from his work, which, again, is the period of the Mother moiety that belongs to the past. Thus, we can construct the following oppositions:

left	right
Malumban	Kuvumban
elder brother	younger brother
female	male

These oppositions are of consequence for social activities. We can observe this regarding the use of (female) dwelling houses and the ritual men's houses. And following the terminology of Bourdieu (1979) we also encounter hierarchical structures like the female encompassing the male:female opposition as all houses are thought to be female, or as both mythological moieties are enclosed in the mother moiety.⁶

Another myth about the creation of different animals shows us again the importance of left/right symbolism. The ancestral being Toatmeli was split into two halves. From the right side of his body emerged animals living on earth, from the left side of his body originated all animals that live in water. The opposition of earth to water or right to left is the main foundation for one of the dual divisions in the Sawos village of Gaikorobi. This dual division groups all clans into pairs with a preferential marriage relation. This dual division is also decisive for rituals like mortuary ceremonies or increase rites, and for economic and social activities. A third dual division crosscutting the above mentioned determines the composition of certain ritual groups.

The Iatmul and Sawos have a highly developed name system, which covers very different aspects of their life. As these names mostly appear in pairs, the dual system has attained further refinement through this name system. There is an enormous variety in paired names, due to the many possibilities of combinations. Some of the most common dual components that differentiate names are the following:

<i>ngi</i> (black)	<i>soa</i> (white)
<i>ngu</i> (water)	<i>kami</i> (fish)
<i>nya</i> (sun)	<i>mbabm</i> (moon)

These few oppositions show us again the two forms of dualism, which were described by Bateson: water and fish could be seen as complementary pairs, water and earth as symmetrical pairs.

In this article I have touched upon only a few aspects of dualism at the level of thought and concepts. Dualism has a very important role for political competition, and I certainly could not describe in detail the economic relevance of dual division. However, the facts should make evident that dualism is a guiding principle in the way of thinking in Middle Sepik societies.

Notes

- 1 A first version of this paper was presented at the Wenner-Gren Symposium No. 101 “Sepik Culture History: Variation and Synthesis” in Mijas, Spain, 1986.
- 2 My field work among the Sawos was carried out in 1972–1974 and during some months in 1979–1981, when my work was focused on the Kwanga.
- 3 ə: neutral vowel less open than a, and similar to final vowel in English brother.
- 4 For more details on symbolism of the coconut palm and village site cf. Schindlbeck (1983).
- 5 Since Bateson’s research among the Iatmul several anthropologists have worked in different villages, among them also Hauser-Schäublin in the village of Kararau in 1972/73. But none of them has concentrated on the question of dual structures.
- 6 These thoughts using also concepts by Louis Dumont (1980) cannot be followed into detail at this point. Nevertheless I thank the editors of this volume for their comments and hints.

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