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Man and the Natural World: Reflections on History and Anthropology

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SUMMARY

The efforts of both anthropologists and historians have been weakened by a failure to take into account what the other half were doing. Anthropologists have tended to see nature and culture as too harmoniously related in the simpler societies, overlooking evidence of the kind of ambivalence that is often regarded as typical of later societies. Modern historians, on the other hand, have tended to see new feelings of nature emerging in their chosen period. In Keith Thomas's *Man and the Natural World*, for example, the idea of development is closely tied to notions of the Enlightenment. A discussion of the cultural history of flowers demonstrates that what seems from a local point of view to be a rapid advance towards the modern may in fact be a catching up with other great traditions, earlier as well as wider.

When I first began to work in the social sciences, history was a field from which anthropology wished to set itself apart. Now every other title in a series I help to edit includes the word 'history'. It is important to understand how this change has taken place.

The earlier separation did not arise because Malinowski and the other functionalists, structuralists or structural-functionalists agreed with Henry Ford that 'history was bunk'. They were concerned with two points. The first had to do with the kind of attention to the past that many of their predecessors had given. The so-called evolutionists (not a very good description) had concentrated, to use the title of one of E. B. Tylor's books, on *The Early History of Mankind* (1871). So too had lawyers like L. H. Morgan of Rochester, NY, whose long-range reconstructions of social life were later taken up by Marxist writers, especially in the USSR. That interest in *la très longue durée* was also a feature of the work of Herbert Spencer and other sociologists and it was clearly influenced in a general way by archaeological and biological discoveries of the post-Darwinian era.

This approach was rejected by many anthropologists who followed for very specific reasons. Firstly, the paucity of available evidence meant that these reconstructions of early social life were often highly speculative, based on the use of somewhat unsystematic methods of comparison and an atomistic view of human society. For these were armchair anthropologists who had little idea of how societies worked, how the pieces they were playing with fitted or didn't fit together. As a result they tended to bring in, to impose, 'evolutionary' or developmental explanations when these were not warranted. For example, there was the well-known attempt to explain the many customs displaying a resistance to marriage on the part of women, typified in the earlier British practice of carrying the bride over the threshold. These widespread customs were interpreted as survivals of an earlier form of marriage by capture. The alternative approach that the functionalists offered was to see this behaviour in terms of the changing structural position of adult women, a kind of institutionalised reluctance to move (she had to be seen to be unwilling) especially when entering a virilocal marriage where residence was determined by the man's location. The earlier explanations were referred to as pseudo-history, which was firmly rejected. There were never the same objections to the kind of historical reconstruction of the recent past of particular non-literate peoples that Boas, the American anthropologist, went in for (what is sometimes called ethnohistory). Nevertheless the shift to professional fieldwork in other cultures meant there was now a concentration on how things work rather than how they came to be as they are (or were); you analysed what was going on under your eyes. Moreover, since this fieldwork was mainly carried out among non-literate peoples, even as far as the past was concerned there was more interest in how notions of it were manipulated or represented, in myth, legends, genealogies, that is, in the actor's view of the past, rather than in narrative history of the academic kind. For many historians, on the other hand, anthropology was either too general, like other social sciences, or else dealing with so-called 'primitives' who were by definition uninteresting and outside the range of historical enquiry.

I present this thumb-nail sketch to explain how it was that history and anthropology came to be separated from one another. But it was not a very deep divide. For there were always some anthropologists who crossed it, especially those who were influenced by Marx and Weber, and were interested in long-term change. For historians, L.H. Morgan's schema of the development of marriage and kinship made its impact by way of Engels when he sketched out his notion of the general development of human society, especially regarding private property, including sexual property. In this way it influenced in a general way early developments in studies of women and the family, although family history owes more to Engels' own early work on *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845).¹ On quite another topic Sir James Frazer's discussion of sacred kingship in *The Golden Bough* was taken up by Marc Bloch in *Les Rois thaumaturges*. Using the works of social anthropologists, later historians added a dimension in their treatment of phenomena such as religious cults, social

movements, carnivals, ritual more generally. There were many other topics including the family and literacy in which there has been much valuable collaboration between anthropologists and historians. A few years ago I worked in Paris at the great centre of French historical research founded by Marc Bloch, now called the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*. Every other course in history advertised there included the words 'Ethnologie' or 'Anthropologie', even to excess. But then that institution had been founded with the social sciences in mind (especially anthropology) in an attempt to modify the dominant traditions of political and narrative accounts towards the socio-cultural accounts favoured by the Annales School.

For just as anthropology was changing its emphasis, over the century, so too was history. Through the revival of social history, it was increasingly taking into account the affairs of those who made minor appearances in the documents of state, especially the lower classes, the illiterate, the underprivileged, the ethnic minorities, as well as other neglected groups such as women, children and alternative sexualities. In order to create a history that included all these you had to examine sources which earlier scholars had overlooked, or even to draw upon the oral tradition and field enquiries in a way that brought history closer to anthropological practices.

So too did the extension from the local and European past to that of the world as a whole. This broadening of Western academic history to include other major civilisations, India and especially China, meant that some historians had to take more seriously the study of other cultures, other forms of social life. One could not work on India without some understanding of caste hierarchy, nor on China without coming up against comparative aspects of lineage and marriage. But the contact with anthropology was especially strong when history was extended to the new nations of sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific which were more different in structure and did not have the same depth of written tradition as the major civilisations of Europe and Asia. For this reason their history had been largely disregarded in academic circles; it had to be created by other means. The development of African history was mainly due to Africa itself where around the time of Independence new universities and existing secondary schools, following politicians and people, demanded a history of their own. Its extension to the curricula of the rest of the world followed, and the process gave authority to different methods of reconstructing the past. For in Africa it was necessary for those scholars who normally paid attention only to the written word to collect and evaluate oral as well as documentary sources, to look at the spoken as well as the written, at the utterance as well as the text.

The use of oral sources was not entirely new: little is. The father of (Greek) history, Thucydides, had already made use of personal recollections in his *History of the Persian Wars*. But formally trained historians became committed to documentary sources; the oral smacked of folk-lore, sociology, reportage. When it came, the change affected Europe as well. E.P. Thompson made use of

folkloristic materials; those dealing with the twentieth century turned to oral accounts, especially of popular life, for example, in the work of Raphael Samuel and others such as Ellen Ross (1983) on London's East End. Naturally the focus shifted from the literate middle-classes to the not so literate working classes, to subaltern history as it has been termed in India. And it had been stimulated by the enquiry of the anthropologist, Oscar Lewis, into what he called the culture of poverty in Mexico.

The result of these endeavours was to extend academic history to those whom Eric Wolf referred to as 'the peoples without history', meaning documented history; for while past and present are often closely intertwined in oral cultures, no society is really in the position that the anthropologist Boas described for the Eskimo, who were said to regard the world as if it has always been as it is now. All societies have some sense of the past, which it is an important part of an anthropologist's task to examine.

The scope of history was certainly broadened by this experience in more than one way. Historians of regions such as Africa inevitably had to try to evaluate the results of archaeological, linguistic and ethnological reports, as well as learning something about the analysis of non-literate societies. Indeed in francophone countries, much of the detailed historical work on local kingdoms as well as more general studies of the past (slavery, warfare) has been carried out by people who have a foot in both camps – Terray, Meillassoux, C.-H. Perrot, Tarditz, Izard and others.

Equally, the reverse process was also taking place, with contemporary anthropologists taking up historical problems for a variety of reasons. Observational studies of so-called traditional societies that have not been swamped by the expansion of 'the world system' have become increasingly difficult. The reconstruction of earlier systems, as anthropologists of North America knew well, involves 'antiquarian' as well as observational skills. Moreover, administrative documents on the recent past have now become available to investigators in Africa in a way they never were (given a sixty-year closure on files) to a previous generation of scholars, whatever their theoretical outlook. In addition those anthropologists more interested in the contemporary rather than the 'traditional' scene are often concerned with the process of development, with social change, giving rise to a different kind of investigation but one which again stresses the time dimension because a comparison is being made of the situation at time A with that at time B (possibly the future). Moreover the very speed of recent changes has meant that at the conscious level these are often of profound significance to the actors, to the human agents themselves, having affected the course of their own lives. Looking at this aspect of people's existence involves an increased attention to memory, to personal recollection and to the experience of individuals, subjects which form a focus of some recent 'cultural anthropology'.

An understanding of this dimension is important for a number of reasons. We

need always to be on our guard against the misrepresentation of others, whether of the Oriental other or of the other next door (or even the other in our own house). The total avoidance of misrepresentation may well be beyond our capacities. But that is no reason for withdrawing from the task, especially since the process of representing the other will continue, whatever we think or do about it. School children will be taught history and adults will make judgements about other cultures. It is surely our task in the Universities and elsewhere (or one of our tasks) to make certain those products and those judgements are the best that it is within our power to make: not to conclude, as some have done, that the way out is to throw up one's hands in despair or to take refuge in the indulgence of frankly fictional or personalised accounts. That may be a way out; it is no way forward.

It is high time I turned from considering the past of scholarship to looking at what I see as one way, certainly not the only way, forward. The example I draw on inevitably has to do with my recent interests which concern the comparison of attitudes to nature and their relation to developments over time.

Recent anthropological discussions about nature have taken a variety of forms. First, there has been the well-known structuralist dichotomy between nature and culture, often assumed to be transcultural, to be a feature of all or most societies. That in turn has been linked in various ways to the dichotomy male-female and other binary categories. I myself do not find that this approach has added greatly to our analytic armoury; indeed I have argued that these decontextualised oppositions, for example, between black (= night, witchcraft) and white (= day, openness), have been grievously misleading in understanding symbolic usage, leaving insufficient room for different contextual usage, for deliberate reversal and for inventive wordplay, for what I call the black-is-beautiful problem.

Second, much work has been done on the way different cultures classify natural objects and link them by homologies to other classes or perceive them as anomalies. The work stems originally from that of Durkheim and Mauss on 'Primitive Classification' and one strand is exemplified in the studies of Mary Douglas on *Purity and Danger*.

Third, there has been the ecological interest in the cultural exploitation of and adaptation to the environment, that has been especially prominent in studies of hunters and gatherers. Such studies have told us much about the livelihood of these peoples, often implicitly praised for their respect of nature compared with our own more devastating attacks upon it.

These studies have dealt rather sketchily with attitudes to nature. Again little enough has been done to integrate such enquiries with the abundant material on modern societies, except for Scott Atran's work on classification in natural history and except for the work on the rural and urban gardens of ordinary people that has been carried out by French ethnologists. If I approach the question from quite a different perspective, that of wider cultural comparison, it is because I

have been stimulated by historians who have been concerned with developments in Europe, especially by Keith Thomas whose study of the subject is entitled *Man and the Natural World* (1983).

Those who were brought up on the work of the Romantic poets imbibed the view that England developed a special attitude to nature at about the time of the Industrial Revolution. Indeed they saw a close connection between the advent of 'the dark Satanic mills' and William Blake's paean to England's 'green and pleasant land'. Earlier in the eighteenth century the appreciation of nature had been directed towards the rural displays of cottage plots and the attempts of aristocratic gardeners to modify the formal lay-outs of the Renaissance and the Restoration (the first under Italian, the second under French influence). This attention was directed not so much to nature itself as to its cultural transformations.

Popular conceptions have been greatly refined as a result of Thomas' book. What I want to do is to offer some thoughts on how his thesis might be extended and modified by pushing the discussion outward to other societies (including non-literate ones) and backward to earlier ones – in other words by seeking help from comparative history and comparative sociology (or anthropology). I do this partly because it raises for me the question of the uniqueness of the West in the process of modernisation (or industrialisation and capitalism) that is of prime concern not only to transcultural studies of an academic kind but also for understanding the world as it is today. I take Thomas' work as the focus partly because of its anthropological background (he was influenced by Evans-Pritchard, especially in his earlier work on *Religion and the Decline of Magic*) and because it carries me along the way I want to go, at least in considering the broader historical problems and setting them in wider framework.

The subtitle of Thomas' book is 'Changing attitudes in England, 1500-1800' and these changes are to be seen, he explains, in the growing number of people who 'had come to find man's ascendancy over nature increasingly abhorrent to their moral and aesthetic sensibilities'. The direction taken by English society during that period meant that the inhabitants of towns developed a new longing for the countryside so that the confident anthropocentrism of Tudor England was upset by 'the growing conflict between the new sensibilities and the material foundations of human society'.² Despite the general attitude in earlier periods that nature was made for humanity, Thomas recognises that different views were evident in the sporadic naturalism of English medieval art, and yet earlier in the works of Aristotle for example. Nevertheless, early modern naturalists 'developed a novel way of looking at things, a new system of classification, leading to subsequent changes in these man-centred attitudes'.³

Even before the modern period, we find not only some elements of naturalism but also important contrary currents of another kind: 'if we look below the surface we shall find many traces of guilt, unease and defensiveness about the treatment of animals'. Europeans, even the ancients, also knew something of the respect paid by Jains, Buddhists and Hindus to the lives of animals (though these

views were often treated with 'baffled contempt'). The references are of course to earlier written cultures. Even locally in Europe, contrary attitudes to the eating of meat were earlier prevalent among Pythagoreans, Manicheans, Cathars, Lollards, and among Benedictine monks. Moreover in the earlier Tudor period, Thomas recognises that some 'hypersensitive persons' took up different positions about, for example, animal rights.

At the same time as acknowledging these contrary attitudes, Thomas also perceives a general shift of sentiment and attitude. For him the early modern period 'generated feelings which would make it increasingly hard for people to come to terms with the uncompromising methods by which the dominance of their species had been secured'.⁴ These feelings are described as 'new sensibilities'. Equally he finds a 'new attitude to', 'a new kind of taste for', wild nature developing in the theological controversies of the early seventeenth century, with the English themselves going furthest in the process of the 'divinisation of nature'.⁵ The author takes pains to defend himself against the charge that the charting of such developments may look like 'a Whiggish search for the intellectual origins of ... the Friends of the Earth'.⁶ In its place he seeks to 'reconstruct an earlier mental world in its own right'. Nevertheless, despite this disclaimer and the contrary evidence he cites, he is committed to a specific chronological approach which includes the vectorial notion of the development of these ideas over time and in space. And since his discussion is about England, that notion of development cannot be dissociated from the idea of the emergence of this country as the first 'modern' capitalist and industrial nation.

We are presented with a difficult analytical and intellectual problem. On the one hand changes in attitudes are taking place; on the other there is evidence of ambivalences that relate, as Thomas notes, to 'the material foundations of human society'.⁷ There is change and there is continuity, and it is a question of sorting out the different elements and defining their nature. I want to argue that Thomas is essentially correct to point to earlier doubts about man's mastery of nature and that this realisation should lead him to modify the penchant of the modern historian for seeing modern thoughts on these matters as first emerging at the time of the Renaissance. That is not to deny changing attitudes, but for evidence of ecological awareness we need to go back not only to earlier literate societies (from which he draws his example) but even to oral cultures. That is to say, we doubt whether these general attitudes concerning 'the divinisation of nature' or doubts about the way man treats it are linked to England, to Europe or even to literate civilisations. The basic dilemma leading to these doubts (and the associated reversals of attitude) lies in the human situation itself and the cognitive contradictions to which it gives rise in the human mind. On that let me turn to the anthropological evidence.

Many anthropologists would be inclined to draw a contrast between the integrated relationships between humanity and nature in the simpler societies and the antagonistic ones in industrial ones. Clearly there are differences in degree in such relationships but some of these differences appear to be strongly

linked to the material means at man's disposal at different periods. All societies are engaged in a struggle with nature. The destruction of wild life, the denuding of forests, the problems of erosion, these are to be found in simpler as well as in complex societies for they relate to their 'material foundations'. That does not imply the existence of an exclusively anthropocentric mentality in the earlier period. We moderns have not invented worries about the exploitation of the natural world. Indeed, the so-called animist or nature-worshipping religions (I am deliberately using a nineteenth-century terminology) can be seen in this light, as part of a dialogue with and about nature.⁸ For example, the agricultural LoDagaa, like many African peoples, interpose a category of being between men and gods that are called *kontome*, 'beings of the wild', as I render the term, 'fairies' as they are often called in West African English. In their long myth known as the Bagre, which includes an extended account of the origin of man and his culture, these beings are seen as intermediaries between the two, for they occupied the hills and rivers and forests long before mankind developed the cultivated spaces. Their herds were the wild animals, their food was gathered from the forest. But they also knew of the art of civilisation and it was they who taught the first man, one of two brothers, how to smelt iron, how to make a hoe, how to grow grain, how to shoot animals, how to fight. None of these cultural acquisitions were wholly unambiguous for humanity. And today the beings of the wild, who resemble in some uncanny ways those European creatures we moderns have set on one side as trolls or dwarfs and enshrined in Disneyland, today they exact from humans penitential sacrifices if they have killed certain of their flock or damaged certain of their trees. Such sacrificial offerings, which may weigh heavily on an individual, can surely be seen as an ecological payment for man's destruction of their habitat and their herds.

Early on in my stay in that society I was surprised to find a local friend reprimanding me for swatting a harmless insect on the grounds that it was one of God's creatures, though he was not above exterminating in a violent fashion what he thought harmful. Such attitudes are often less explicit. I have argued that among the LoDagaa even the honourable destruction of human life, the shedding of blood in war, had to be ritually condoned.⁹ And that perhaps one aspect of the taboos whereby clans forbade the eating of one wild animal but consumed many others (that is, totemism in one of its varieties) had a similar role of apologising for the killing of living things by each clan preserving one species. The blood sacrifice of domestic animals, which was virtually the only way that meat was consumed by the LoDagaa, could also be regarded as sacralising the murder of a living being that had blood in its veins.

It is not only the destruction of animal life that causes second thoughts. Think too of the sacrifices, discussed by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, to the dying but resurrected god, that were made in the Middle East at the time of the cutting of the corn, for such an act was seen as the killing of the corn spirit. Even

the harvesting of domesticated crops involved a slaughter of the living plant, which called for some spiritual redress. The harvest sacrifice was thus not merely a thanksgiving but an apology as well. In this sense it resembled the ritualised slaughter of meat in Judaism and Islam, to which the modern West often takes such exception. We butcher in a more rational, secular, 'humane' manner, leaving the apologies to be made, the doubts to be expressed, by the increasing number of vegetarians amongst us.

Such ambivalent attitudes, though widespread, are not necessarily universal, and they differ from place to place and from time to time. They are not embedded in the cultural or racial genes but arise out of the situation of the human actors in their contact with nature. In certain times and places, as among the followers of Indic religions, such attitudes have long been much more developed than they are even in the modern, vegetarianised West. For some Westerners that is precisely the appeal of those creeds.

In other words the kinds of attitudes towards animals that are expressed in the Greek writer Porphyry's *De Abstinencia*, a tract partly directed against Christian omnivorousness, are examples of widespread feelings of ambivalence about humanity's relationships with the natural world. At different times and different places, one or other pole of this ambivalence is emphasised in a way that takes various forms depending on the particular cultural context and upon long-term trends. The relative weighting placed on these aspects is something for scholars to work out. But to describe recent changes in Europe or England as 'new feelings', much less 'new' 'mentalities', is to run the danger of overlooking the ambivalences of others and of attributing too much to Western modernity, and in the present case especially to England's contribution to its growth.

I have discussed so far earlier and other ambivalences about the exploitation of nature. There is the further question of the straightforward appreciation of nature, which is often seen as a post-Renaissance development. For example, attitudes to wild nature, in particular to mountains, are seen as changing with Petrarch's visit to the Rhone valley in 1336 when he climbed Mont Ventoux, rising to a height of 1,912 metres. That attribution of a completely new mentality disregards not only the earlier concerns of the Romans but the wider perspectives of cultural history. We find a largely non-anthropocentric attitude towards the wild, especially mountains, in the Chinese landscapes of the Tang period; that was seen as a place to which to retire from the troubles of this world, especially political ones, encouraged by Daoist notions of the sacred mountain. Indeed some of the drugs with which Daoists experimented are said to have created a compulsive desire to walk or climb and it has even been claimed that there is a connection between drug-addiction and the early development of Chinese nature poetry.¹⁰ The realistic rendering of landscape, thought by Dubs to be the result of Roman influence on a Han battle scene, goes back much earlier, to tiles in a

tomb at Nan-kuan in Honan and to a bronze *hu* from c. 300 BCE where hunting and sea-battles are depicted.

Despite the differences between Eastern and Western landscape painters, the former being said to display 'an abridged realism impregnated with spirit', the latter 'a palpable naturalism', there may well have been mutual influences, both then and later.¹¹ The introduction of pictorial art into the Islamic culture of Safavid Persia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries certainly owed a great deal to Chinese influences brought by the Mongols to western Asia. That tradition in turn may have affected the painters of paradise gardens in western Europe.¹² The sixteenth century in Europe also saw the development of the specialised genres of still life and landscape painting. Still life had emerged in the Low Countries partly from the representations introduced in border illustrations to illuminated books. They included many 'oriental' features which came to Holland through eastern trade and made it the centre for curios. Landscape painting developed from the tortuous backgrounds to Gothic paintings into more realistic landscapes later in the sixteenth century, a process that may have been influenced by the East, in a later reversal of the suggested Roman importation into the East. A number of art historians have pointed to the analogues in composition between East and West at this time, and it has been suggested that Western art of the Renaissance may owe something to the pictorial motifs on eastern ceramics, textiles and lacquerware available from the fourteenth century onwards.¹³ The famous *têtes composées* of Arcimboldo (1527-93), in which natural objects were arranged into fantastic portraits of humans, may have been inspired by Mughal paintings of fantastic animals.¹⁴ None of this is at all certain, but the opening up of the Renaissance was certainly much more than a rebirth of Rome; it embodied and developed themes from other cultures, as is especially clear in the history of woodcuts and engravings, and earlier in textile design.

The influence of Asian designs on textile in Byzantium and Western Europe was transmitted through Sassanid weavers of Persia from the third to the seventh centuries CE.¹⁵ In late antiquity, 'In northern Europe, every great church was hung with Byzantine silks;... saints were inappropriately buried in shrouds of Persian silk, showing the griffins of Zoroastrian mythology and the hunting feats of pagan shahs in the Iranian plateau'.¹⁶ Knowledge of the silkworm had come to the Emperor Justinian through Soghdian middlemen in central Asia (a sub-Iranian society) who had a century previously sold Roman glass-making techniques to the emperor of China. 'Dragons, fabulous birds, and floral motifs from Chinese textiles ... helped enrich European iconography and to give a rhythmical quality to Romanesque ornament', though this movement came to a temporary end with the rise of Islam and later with the domination of Gothic art in the thirteenth century. However with the establishment of the European silk industry first at Palermo in the twelfth century (though Islamic Spain copied Egyptian textiles as early as the tenth century), then by 1300 on the Italian mainland and in the thirteenth century at Lucca, weavers borrowed directly from

the motifs on Chinese textiles, flying birds, the lotus flower, waterfalls, rocks, stylised cloud forms, and often entire landscapes, to produce 'Tartar cloths'. This interchange of images between West and East in both directions argues for a broad similarity of approaches and conditions, rather than the dominance of one over the other. As with the scientific fields examined by Joseph Needham in his great series, *Science and Civilisation in China*, the traditions took roughly parallel courses over the long run, except for that remarkable dip in western knowledge systems after the classical period and the rise beginning in the fifteenth.

My own direct interest in this topic has been of a more specific kind but concerned nonetheless with the West and the East, as well as with the North and the South. It was generated by noting the relative *absence* of the use of flowers in Africa as compared to India and Bali. It was not difficult to account for the difference in the use of domesticated flowers, since the first appearance of what I may loosely call an aesthetic as distinct from a utilitarian horticulture occurred at what it would be correct to see as a subsequent stage in the evolution of the agricultural economy than Africa had reached. It is true that this continent had adopted the use of metals but it had not developed many of the techniques that accompanied the second Agricultural Revolution of the earlier Bronze Age, namely, the intensive agriculture that involved the control of animal energy in ploughing and the control of water for irrigation. Productivity was and remains low and the limits of the potential surplus discouraged the kind of attention that people, especially elites, could give to aesthetic matters. But the problem was more complicated than that because even wild flowers were little used compared to leaves, bark and roots, and that seems in part a question of safeguarding flowers as the harbingers of fruit, grain or berries, which was also a moral matter.

Asia was quite different from Africa. There flowers were actually cultivated to be used as offerings to the gods, as festival decorations often connected with prosperity, as adornments for the living. Their representations played a prominent part in the great tradition of Chinese and Japanese painting, as well as on furniture, on carvings and in Buddhist temples. In Africa I have never witnessed flowers used for these purposes in traditional situations, though certainly changes are now occurring rapidly. Instead offerings to local gods were of food, drink or blood sacrifice, for which flowers in the Indic religions were an explicit substitute, representing one aspect of the rejection of the taking of animal life, just as that in turn represented in Abraham's case the rejection of the deliberate offering of human life.

In contrasting the use of cultivated flowers in Europe and Asia with their absence in most of Black Africa, except for the East African coast under Asian influences, I was struck by the fact that it was not only in Africa that the use of flowers had little of the attraction for human beings that is often seen as universal. Even in Europe and Asia there was some ambivalence and at times a rejection.

For example, the intensive flower culture of the Ancient Mediterranean, especially in Rome, was seen by many moralists as seriously flawed. Firstly it was part of a culture of luxury (which the exploitation of nature for food rarely was in quite the same way) and hence of differentiation (the rich enjoyed flowers while the poor who grew them lacked the basic comestibles). Secondly, the production of flowers, especially in hothouses, was seen to be forcing nature into unnatural paths.

These trends were not dominant during the Roman period. But they were present and vigorously taken up by Christians, who also accepted the idea, the Judaic idea, that the offering of flowers to gods or to men was a pagan practice; the omnipotent God had no need of material gifts, only of prayer.

As a result of this ideological change and of economic factors the culture of flowers in Europe experienced a drastic downturn in the Dark Ages. Affected were not only the growth and use of flowers for religious purposes but secular life too was notably sparing in this respect. That downturn was seen in representation as well as reality, and had its effect on developments in botany, especially in comparison with the contemporary East which was in many ways more advanced. Only with the high Middle Ages did the situation change in a major way, with the return of floral decoration to Gothic sculpture and its use in ecclesiastical services, and later with the German botanists of the fifteenth century.

But there was to be a subsequent rejection in the Reformation, especially by Puritans who reverted to many of the ways of the early Church and restricted the use of flowers, not only in the meeting house and the burial ground. Such a heritage of denial lives on, not only in New England. Visitors to Europe are often struck by the staggering contrast between compact, colourful, much visited Italian cemeteries and the vast, deserted urban graveyards of North America. Moreover the penetration of the church into everyday life meant that even the garlands on the Maypole, erected by one Thomas Merton (author of *The New Canaan*) in Mary Mount, Mass., in 1637, were likened by Governor Bradford (of the Plymouth Colony) to the offerings made by erring Israelites to the Golden Calf. That was one of the factors that made America, at least until relatively recently, a land of thin rather than thick rituals, not only in a floral sense but in others too.

Despite this setback at the time of the Reformation and in some other revolutionary situations, the culture of flowers in European societies since the Renaissance has experienced a remarkable expansion. That is still proceeding. With overseas conquests, new flora were brought back to Europe in large quantities, resulting in an elaboration of their classificatory schemata as well as of their gardens and symbolic structures.¹⁷ World domination exported all of those features to other parts of the globe.¹⁸ With the increasing ease of transport a world market was developed in cut flowers so that today red roses nightly make the trip from Bogota, Colombia, to the United States and the Netherlands, from

where they are distributed throughout Europe and even Asia. Today the production of flowers is shifting from the glass houses on the outskirts of major Western cities to the farmlands of tropical countries where they can be grown without the expenditure of fossil fuels on which the northern industry depended in the colder seasons. It is true that ambivalence, even opposition, is displayed by some critics who would again prefer to see people growing grain rather than cultivating geraniums. But such concerns have not stopped the growth of the use of flowers as commodities that has brought some obvious benefits to the Third World. You take our grain, we take your roses, to paraphrase an epigram of Martial.

In Europe this expansion has proceeded from the late middle ages in what might be thought a Whiggish manner, linked to modernisation. There are even those cultural historians who see the English garden and love of flowers, a comparatively recent phenomenon, as an indication of a different 'mentality' from others on that or any other continent, even of a new attitude to nature. And who implicitly link such achievements, like those of the Romantic poets, with the potentiality in England for becoming 'the first industrial nation', the spearhead of modernity.

But while there were important developments in the culture of flowers in England, Europe and the West generally, we have to interpret these against the wider background of the great falling off that had taken place following the Roman period. That decline heightens the impression of dramatic cultural advance in the modern period whereas in fact much of this burst of activity involved catching up with the cultures of the East, indeed with the past of Mediterranean Europe, before it suffered from doubts about the use of flowers under early Christianity. When this was viewed against its early past a 'new' attitude towards flowers can be said to have emerged in Europe. But it was not a new attitude, a new mentality, a new view of nature, in any global sense. Both the love of flowers and the ambivalence about flowers had been present earlier in other cultures of luxury, that preceded the shift to the late industrial cultures of affluence, of mass consumption. We find similar doubts expressed in China, by philosophers anxious about the poor, in folk tales anxious about forcing nature, and during the Cultural Revolution, anxious about luxury cultures and filling the peasant's rice bowl.

Turning back to Thomas' *Man and the Natural World*, I argued that both anthropological and historical efforts have been weakened by a failure to take into account what the other half were doing. Anthropologists tended to see nature and culture as too harmoniously related in the simpler societies, overlooking evidence of the kind of ambivalence and even guilt that are often seen as attached to later societies. Modern historians tended to see new feelings towards nature emerging in their chosen period, whereas some implicit realisation of the basic problem of control and exploitation is certainly present in simpler societies, both in the past and in the present. There is a second point which emerged in my

discussion of the cultural history of flowers. For many historians their view of development, of progress even, is closely tied to notions of the Enlightenment, of capitalism, and hence often enough of England, Europe or the West. Important events happened in that country and that continent since the Renaissance. But as I argued in dealing with flowers, and the same is perhaps more widely true of attitudes to nature, part of what from a local point of view seems to be a rapid advance towards the modern, was in fact a catching up with other great traditions, earlier as well as wider. We cannot understand what is happening in the modern world, especially the East, if we remain committed to a Weberian, Marxist or folk view about the deep structure of East-West differences. Those misunderstandings may not affect all our work in any direct fashion but they do so indirectly because of the inevitably ethnocentric academic tradition in which we have been raised.

Particularly towards flowers we found ambivalent attitudes, especially in societies with advanced agriculture, with stratification, with writing and with cultures of luxury. Under certain circumstances, religious or revolutionary, puritanical or socialist, objections to their use may become dominant, as we saw was also the case with the use of animals for human consumption. Such ambivalences have both a continuing and a changing dimension; for that reason we cannot readily describe them in terms of changes of mentality. They are new feelings, sentiments or attitudes only in a specific context, not in the broader picture of comparative history, sociology or psychology. They were available to and often expressed in Oriental civilisations and only superficially have anything to do with the growth of the market, the division of labour, the industrialisation of production that we refer to as the development of capitalism and that we link with the rise, indeed the uniqueness of the West.

There are *other* changes, not in the structure of sentiments, but in use, symbols and marketing, that are linked to these wider developments in economy and society. It is the job of comparative history and comparative anthropology (or sociology) to explore which is which. But this cannot be done from the perspective of one time and place, nor yet from one discipline. The Uniqueness of the West can only be determined by looking seriously at the *other* as well as at ourselves.

NOTES

¹ The 1845 edition was in German; the first English edition appeared in 1887.

² Thomas 1983: 300-303.

³ *Ibid.*: 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 302.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 259, 261.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 15-16.

- ⁷ Ibid.: 302-3.
⁸ E. Goody 1995.
⁹ Goody 1962.
¹⁰ Hawkes 1989: 47.
¹¹ See G. Cart 1960; C. Sterling 1931.
¹² Goody 1993.
¹³ Lach 1970: 73-4.
¹⁴ Ibid.: 77.
¹⁵ See Lach 1970: 96.
¹⁶ Brown 1971: 158.
¹⁷ Atran 1990.
¹⁸ Grove 1995.

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