

The Study of Villages According to a Configurationistic Method

The study of a village may be undertaken in many different ways, not only according to whichever method an ethnologist may wish to use, but mainly having regard to the conditions which are offered by such a study. The method itself may often be determined by the object of the study.

A well defined and isolated grouped-in community cannot be studied in the same manner as a village where there exists a scattering of the *population*, without a clear boundary — except for the administrative delimitation — between the *in-group* and the *out-group*¹.

It may also be of interest, as in the case of Redfield, to study a rural group in relation to an urban centre, and to analyse the influence which the latter is exerting on the former².

Even ecology and the adaptation of a society to complex and much diversified environmental conditions impose their own, appropriate methods. This would, for instance, be the case of Castro Laboreiro, where many rural nuclei periodically move into more unsheltered and higher villages (the “*brandas*” — the summer stations) or into cosier and more sheltered ones (the “*inverneiras*” — the cold winter stations) depending on the agro-pastoral needs of the seasons of the year. In such cases, the diversity of the groups and their cyclical movements hinder so perfect an integration as would advise a configurationistic study of the whole. By themselves, these complexes of groups which move periodically, within a geographical environment containing very typical traits, and the great isolation in which they have lived until a few years ago, far from urban influences, give the same groups an individual and characteristic style which distinguishes them from other groups situated more or less close by. However, I would not dare say whether it is advisable to study this human group as if it were a perfect unity, because it, in fact, is a complex of groups. Only a careful analysis of all the groups of the complex would allow a conclusive opinion.

Yet, it is clear that an attempt at a configurationistic study of compact villages which are well isolated from others and without easy contact with urban centres is assured of much greater success.

There are still in Portugal a few villages responding to these requirements like Vilarinho da Furna³ or Rio de Onor⁴ which, because of secular isolation in very poor environmental regions and closed to contacts with neighbours, made it possible for a community social organization, based on an agricultural economy where a considerable portion of land is common to all the members of the Council of Neighbours, to be maintained until today. This council is made up of all the heads of family or their legally recognised representatives. These alone can keep their cattle in the common fields and benefit from the privileges granted to the Council members.

1. Terms used primarily by W. G. Sumner which are common in ethnological literature today.

2. Robert Redfield, *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*. Chicago 1941.

3. Jorge Dias, *Vilarinho da Furna, uma aldeia comunitária*. Porto 1948.

4. Jorge Dias, *Rio de Onor, comunitarismo agro-pastoril*. Porto 1953.

Any one of these villages has its own chiefs periodically elected by all the neighbours. They are like a small state within a great state.

From each family, called "home", only one male may get married, all the remaining males having to accept celibacy and to give a helping hand to the farming chores of the home to which they belong. He who marries against this tradition either will be considered a marginal man, will have no rights within the group, will have to live by his wits, will have to take advantage of what help he may get from his family, will become a smuggler, or he will emigrate.

In villages of this type, which are perfectly integrated, it is not difficult to perform a configurationistic analysis, because any one of them possesses its own unmistakable style. We may, thus, abstractly create a configurationistic representation of each one of them as if it were a modal personality.

By accepting an old classification, which stems from Schiller and Nietzsche and has been adopted by Ruth Benedict, we can say that the inhabitants of Vilarinho da Furna are "apollineous" while those of Rio de Onor are "dionisiac"; these are cultural constants which may indisputably be observed. But it is clear that this will be specially valuable at certain moments, as for instance during periods when outside circumstances contribute to a "euphoric" or "disphoric"⁵ integration.

Anyway, a configurationistic interpretation is an abstraction, which though interesting in that it allows for a synthetic characteristic, has nevertheless the shortcoming of hiding the live processes of social inter-relations which are indispensable for understanding how the socio-cultural whole works.

No matter how much a society may be a unit, it is always made up of individuals, and an ethnologist, interested as he may be in the general patterns of the group, may not forget that the whole is the product of an adjustment of all. This conscious or unconscious dialogue between each man and the society to which he belongs is a live and fundamental aspect which enables us to understand the processes presiding over cultural dynamism; this inclusively explains the seeming uniformity of the whole, which renders a configurationistic interpretation possible.

I think that the study of these small societies with an old social tradition should be given priority, because they are changing rapidly and soon there will be little left of their past. However, I believe that one should not concentrate only on those cases representing forms of an archaic life. The social dynamism of such villages which have suddenly to face up to new needs and are perforce put to test due to a fast change of culture, as a result of the great changes taking place in European agricultural economy, is most interesting and should not be ignored. The time when ethnologists were only concerned with old-fashioned habits or customs, totally ignoring modern times, is long past. In fact, what should concern us is Man in his social inter-relations and the answers he has found to the problems which life itself has put before him.

5. Terms first used by Radcliffe-Brown now familiar in ethnological terminology.

However, as ethnologists, our task should also not limit itself to aspects of social life when this is exclusively seen in terms of social structure and organization. It is important to analyse the system of traditional values of each group, which will function as a vital centre of each society. Should outside pressures, resulting from modern economic conditions, attempt against this system of values, the group in question can become not only disphoric, but it can even enter into a veritable condition of social disintegration.

It is important to analyse which are the forms of compensation which a group finds in order to satisfy the loss of its traditional values. This compensation may recreate a new "eunomic" balance or, on the contrary, it may find unfortunate solutions, such as alcoholism, gambling, or other vices leading to brutalization or violence.

Music, song and dance, physical toil — considered almost as a sports competition, free and reciprocal collective labour of a festive character were all some of the current forms to find compensation, at a low economic level, in some Portuguese rural areas. The study of some of the answers found by rural populations in the course of time tells us what the past was. But at present we are suffering from a more or less rapid transformation, depending on the areas concerned, and it would be important to know what are the solutions of compensation in order to restore a social balance which has been shaken by the transformation that the traditional system of values of vast rural areas has suffered.

Such a programme has the advantage of making an ethnologist stay what he has always been — a student of live human societies. Should we limit ourselves to an analysis of agricultural implements, of religious ceremonies of the past, of cyclical festivities, of music and dance, we are turning ourselves into archaeologists. This does not mean that I despise such a study, because today's cultural forms are the product of a long evolution in which independent innovations and their diffusion did in the past and continue in the present to collaborate; however, we should avoid being held on only to the past and forget that life forges on. And we are interested in knowing how.