

THE MISSA MAJOR

Preface¹[see p.xiii]

When I first approached the Dominican community at Blackfriars in Oxford during Hilary Term, 1973 with the idea of doing an ethnography of their Latin rite, several of their questions had to be answered: questions about the nature of my proposed project, its form and significance. Usually, it is the anthropologist who asks all the questions. Later on, I had ample opportunity to conduct interviews, but not to begin with. Dominican friars are highly literate, well-read informants who don't take anything for granted, so I found myself being quizzed, first, about well-known anthropological works in the field, as e.g., Turner's work among the Ndembu (1967), Stanner's on Australian Aborigines (1979), Evans-Pritchard's work on Nuer religion (1956), and Lienhardt's among the Dinka (1961). Once these preliminaries were over, another line of questioning started.

Father Preston asked,² "What prompts you to want to do anthropology in (not your own, but) a similar culture?" "For a start", I replied, "I'm an anthropologist of literate culture -- an awkward phrase used to designate those interested in their own customs, rites and the loss of important rituals as they are in those of other cultures."³ Second, I'm part of a newer approach in social anthropology, based on a different idea of objectivity than older styles of research (see Parkin 1982, for discussions of a semantic anthropology, and Williams, 1991: 287-321, for applied personal anthropology). Third, I'm deeply concerned about the loss of the Latin rites in the Catholic Church prompted by the edicts of Vatican II. Finally, I represent an approach to the study of ritual in anthropology that is relatively unknown, as I use a different technology, i.e. Laban's system of movement-writing. Ultimately my work will centre around a written text of the actions of the Mass".

"Interesting", he replied, "but let me ask another question. I see by your letter of introduction that you were a teacher, choreographer and dancer for many years. Do you consider the Mass, past or present, to be in some sense a drama or a dance?" "No", I said, "that's one of the important reasons for the investigation. There are significant differences between

dramaturgical and liturgical models of events. These are often confused, and part of the purpose for the project is to sort out the differences and similarities between these models of analysis and explanation".

"Fair enough", he said, "and I suppose it's only right to tell you that if you had answered otherwise, the community *would not* consent to assist you in your research. Although there have been periods in Church history where the model of a dramatic performance has been used with regard to the Mass, it isn't the most appropriate model for the rite, nor do we believe the Mass is a drama". He continued, "if the community consents to help you with this project, what will it entail?"

I interpreted his question as an invitation to outline my research agenda, which would involve subjecting members of the community to hours of questioning. I explained I would approach them in traditional anthropological style -- not of "participant observation" because there is no way I could become a Dominican friar, nor could I live with the community, but in another way. Central to the ethnography of the Mass was a 'folk model' of the event, which meant eliciting from them how *they* conceived of the Latin rite -- in the past and now -- and how they saw themselves in relation to it.

Because of the technology of movement writing, I would have to spend hours with someone thoroughly knowledgeable in the old Latin rite, as I would generate the movement text from working with him.⁴ Finally, I told him I was prepared to study or read whatever was deemed necessary for the project, as the finished work would be presented to the community (not exactly for their approval, because they were not anthropologists) but because it was necessary to know that the *reportage* I did was accurate. The community had to recognize what I talked about in the completed ethnography as the Dominican Tridentine Mass.

Consent of the whole community wasn't given after this first interview. What followed was a series of three meetings with members of the community, not all of whom were favourably inclined towards the project. "What", one elderly friar demanded,⁵ "can you conceivably imagine yourself to contribute to all of THAT?"

"THAT" was indicated by an extended gesture of his right arm which included, not only the Cloister's library, but all the libraries on the town-end of St. Giles Road in Oxford, among them the Bodleian and the Ashmolean! I refused to be intimidated.

"I'm aware of the vast literature written on the Mass, Father, but even so, I don't believe anyone has ever done an ethnography of the rite such as I envision".

"So, you think your anthropology is going to add something of importance to the literature, do you?"

"Yes, because nothing I know of has been written about the Mass from the standpoint of practising priests. What social anthropologists do, among other things, is try to understand such things from the viewpoints and experiences of the ritual specialists who practise them".

I drew breath at this point, prepared to continue, but Father Preston interrupted: "What she means to say, Father, is that she wants to elevate me as novice-master (and all of us) to the status of African chieftains -- or witchdoctors. Isn't that right, Ms. Williams?"

I admitted his statement was true with as much grace as I could muster in the general laughter that ensued. But his question and my answer, marked the turning point in the community's minds about giving me their consent for the project, which began about a month later, but with nothing so exciting as interviews.

Since females were not permitted into the Cloister library (nor beyond the boundaries of the parlour in 1973), Father Preston carried piles of books and relevant materials that were necessary for me to read, "to familiarize myself with the discourse", as he put it. In this way, the ethnography of the Mass was started, to be presented in completed form in Vols. 2 and 3 of a Doctoral thesis for which I supplicated in 1975-76. That work forms the basis of this monograph.

The Nature of the Investigation

I make a point of the initial encounter with the Dominican community for several reasons, mainly to draw readers' attention to the differences between an ethnography and any other piece of descriptive writing. A good ethnography may read very much like an ordinary descriptive essay, but the similarity is deceptive, because of the use of technical terms, for a start,⁶ and because of the importance of prevailing explanatory paradigms, theories and methodological assumptions which are made by the investigator, which guide the completed ethnography.⁷ Like the discipline of linguistics, social anthropology has the problem of being both literate and numerate. It is only fair to let readers in on the game.⁸

The general theoretical point of view taken in this work is that of semasiology.⁹ Directly relevant is a concept of human bodies as 'signifying bodies'. The notion of a signifying body defines a body belonging to *a creature who can generate language, significations and symbolic actions*. It refers to creatures who possess the nature, powers and capacities to speak, to construct and to use meaningful systems of actions for the purposes of expression and communication with others. Semasiologists call this signifying body the expressive or "semasiological body".

In western medicine the body has, by and large, been considered separate from the mind and seen as a kind of machine; a network of purely physical processes, having functions, true, but basically mind-less functions. The behaviour of this body *in that context* is best understood by studying the nature of its individual physical parts. It is an inappropriate model of the human body and its behaviour for the purposes of investigating rites like the Latin Mass, or indeed, any structured system of human actions, because the gestures and moves in a ritual, a dance, a signing system, an exercise technique or whatever, are composed of culturally-learned, linguistically-tied, semantically-laden actions. In fact, semasiologists try to avoid using the word 'behaviour' because of its ambiguities (see Ardener, 1973).

Classical physics and mechanics tend to see the body in the same way as western medicine does, and the notion of a 'real' body (without a mind) is a product of classical deterministic physics. The notion of the body that lies behind semasiological analysis is different. In that theoretical context, the body is conceived as if existing in a field that is a time-less state of no energy. In other words, the signifying body occupies a kind of superposition of possibilities in a mathematical framework of *all theoretically possible moves that it could make*, with equal probabilities of realization, until an actual move takes place. At that point a selection is made (not always conscious on the part of the actor) in a field of complementarities which manifest as an empirically visible move, act or action. Although the body has equal *probabilities* of realizing movement out of a theoretical field of *possibilities*, not all possible actions are ever realized in any coherent system of body language in the world. One of the determining factors here is the hierarchical system of values placed by a specific culture on spatial dimensions, e.g. values assigned to right/left, up/down, front/back, up/down, and inside/outside.

Different Kinds of Script and Technical Terminologies

On the subject of more numerate aspects of social anthropological investigation, I must say I don't apologize for the style of analysis that appears in this essay between pp. 61-74 of Section III under the sub-heading, *The Analysis of an Event*. It is different from other types of analysis used in the ethnography. The style of analysis in that subsection is delivered in set theoretical terms. If readers are unfamiliar with set theory, they are going to find those pages hard going, but I can't help that. I've tried to make the sub-section as clear as possible for those who are acquainted with set theoretical discourse, so they might discern how it is used, but beyond that, I couldn't go. I've been told there is much to be gained from reading the ethnography minus pp. 61-74 because it hasn't been published elsewhere.

The style of descriptive writing generally used throughout is typically anthropological. That is, it's been taken from field notes and tapes of interviews with friars-preachers. In some cases, for example, the words of the consecration, are followed by the friars' translations and explanations. These kinds of passage are scattered throughout the essay, but they are not documented in familiar ways out of respect for the monastic convention of anonymity. No translations or explanations are attributed to any particular Dominican *at their request*. I take full responsibility for the whole of the verbal text I have written, and for the accuracy of the quotations and paraphrases, but I want their sources to be recognized.

The Influence of Language and Linguistics

While on this general subject, may I say, too, that some readers might find the references to Saussure and to other linguists' work confusing. Semantic anthropology is but one of several linguistically-based approaches to modern social anthropological investigation. I have included references only where not to have done so would have been to disregard the intellectual debts owed to linguists and semioticians, living or dead. Similarly, readings in areas of contemporary philosophy have been of immeasurable value in relation to this work, and I would want to acknowledge the works of David Best (1978 and 1992), Wittgenstein (1967 and 1968), and the early work of Rom Harré (also a D.Phil. thesis examiner) in particular. Although solidly grounded in social anthropology, my (and my students') work in this field, owing to the nature of semasiology, is necessarily interdisciplinary. We attempt to make it honestly so, and we try to handle terms from other disciplines with care, hence the proliferation of end-notes.

A final comment: theologians may consider the first section of the ethnography of the Missa Major little more than good religious journalism -- or so one uncharitable critic said. If so, I've fulfilled adequate goals with reference to the field of theology -- goals defined by the limits of my professional competence, for I am not a theologian, nor do I claim to be one. In fact, I am grateful to those who judged the section in this way, because they seem to acknowledge the fact that I haven't committed theological *gaucheries*, and they implied 'the homework' was adequate.

These linguistic notes are, perhaps, relevant: 1. throughout, the word 'Divinity' (upper case 'D') is used in its technical, anthropological sense, cf. Lienhardt (1961); 2. it is not often realized how few people are acquainted with more than one translation of the Bible (or with any translation). While inclusion of the King James versions of the texts in an Appendix (see p. 91) as supplements to the Douay texts may seem tiresome to Biblical scholars, there are many who have need of them; 3. Those who expect an *apologia* for Catholicism in this writing will be sorely disappointed. Finally, there are radical differences detectable in a professional anthropologist's usage of the word 'anthropology' from older usages common in the fields of theology and philosophy. Older usages aren't applicable in this context. Words such as 'immolation' are used somewhat differently too.

On the whole, what appears in the essay to follow was written in the Doctoral thesis, with a few additions that are especially relevant, not only because twenty years have passed since the original work was completed, but because any additional comments stem from valuable feedback I've received from graduate students, general readers and critics since 1975. Especially notable in this regard is the advice and assistance contributed by Dr. Brenda Farnell. Even more recently, the feedback included many valuable comments of the author of the Foreword, whose "counsel of perfection" (Pocock 1994: 21) has greatly influenced my work as a professional anthropologist since 1975. Mere thanks to David Pocock are hardly adequate, yet this is the word our language provides for such occasions.

The entire work is lovingly dedicated to the memory of Geoffrey Preston, O.P., whose untimely death in the late 'seventies prevented further work on concepts of time and the liturgical calendar which we had started in 1976. His advice, admonitions and assistance were invaluable. They have so far proved to be irreplaceable and he is sorely missed.



NOTES:

¹ The name 'Missa Major' would have been printed 'Missa Maior' in pre-nineteenth century books. The 'j' is, therefore, a modern convention. It is meant to be read as 'i' and pronounced as 'y'.

² Geoffrey Preston, O.P., who was the novice-master at the time, who was an historian and liturgist.

³ This kind of anthropology has since been re-named; it is called *the anthropology of parallel cultures*, under the general notion of doing anthropology "at home" (see Jackson, 1987).

⁴ This patient soul was Fr. Osmund Lewry, O.P., now deceased, without whose assistance I would not have been able to complete the movement text of the Missa Major.

⁵ He later relented. In fact, it was he who translated the prayers of the investiture (see Note 9, pp. 77-78, Section III) and claimed he would be willing to show me all the movements of the investiture for the priest in the sacristy if I wanted him to.

⁶ Semasiology cannot do without the technical term *hierarchy*, for example, nor, in my view, can any adequate account of human actions. Dumont (1987: 279) gives a definition of the term with which I concur, i.e. HIERARCHY: To be distinguished from power, or command: order resulting from the consideration of value. The elementary hierarchical relation is that between a whole (or a set) and an element of that whole (or set) -- or else that between two parts with reference to the whole. It can be analyzed into two contradictory aspects belonging to different levels: *it is a distinction within an identity*, an encompassing of the contrary (italics are mine). Dumont adds that "hierarchy is thus bi-dimensional", a proposition with which semasiologists would agree, but, based on our work on the body; dances, sign systems and the like, we would want to say that hierarchy is thus at *least* bi-dimensional, and probably includes much more.

⁷ An important point was made to me in a personal communication by the novelist, Doris Lessing: "I wouldn't be an anthropologist for anything", she said, "because you people have to write what your people *actually* say and do. My characters are all under my control. Yours aren't!"

⁸ Another of the technical terms to which I alluded, to be understood in the sense of a "language game" in a serious, Wittgensteinian sense.

⁹ See Williams (1982) for a definition of this term and for a broad exegesis of the point of view. A short definition is given on p. 54, Note 19.