FIELDWORK, RECIPROCITY, AND THE MAKING OF ETHNOGRAPHIC TEXTS: THE EXAMPLE OF MAURICE LEENHARDT

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Maurice Leenhardt's ethnographic work in New Caledonia spanned nearly half a century, from 1902-1948. The first part of this field research is described and analysed, as background to his later anthropological writings. Leenhardt's specific position as a missionary-ethnographer is discussed, its advantages and disadvantages weighed. A liberal missionary perspective is found, in this case, to be conducive to a portrayal of cultural process. Leenhardt's translation methodology and his relations with key informants are detailed. Transcription, the means by which ethnographic texts are constituted by more than a single subject, is speculatively extended to ethnographic practice generally. Field research may be seen as a collective, reciprocal endeavour through which textualised translations are made. This viewpoint calls into question common notions of description, interpretation and authorship in the writing of ethnography.

Maurice Leenhardt would have agreed with the Fiji evangelist Lorimer Fison who remarked to Codrington: 'When a European has been living for two or three years among savages he is sure to be fully convinced that he knows all about them; when he has been ten years or so amongst them, if he be an observant man, he finds that he knows very little about them, and so begins to learn' (Codrington (1891), 1972: vii). Leenhardt, himself an evangelist in New Caledonia for a quarter century, then a university-based anthropologist and fieldworker, had ample occasion to confirm Fison's point—a point that still poses a challenge for ethnographic practice.

Unlike many missionaries who have come to know a great deal about 'savages', Leenhardt was able to express his long field experience with the analytic rigour and systematic mode of exposition associated with academic anthropology. As first president of the Société des Océanistes and head of the Pacific section at the Musée de l'Homme, as holder of an influential chair at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (a chair long occupied by Marcel Mauss and, after Leenhardt, by Claude Lévi-Strauss) the former evangelist played a key role in the belated organisation of scientific ethnography in France.

In the Paris University of the thirties and forties Leenhardt represented a unique brand of experience. He had been a successful, though unconventional, Protestant missionary in south-east Melanesia and had travelled widely in sub-

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Saharan Africa. His evangelical work was theoretically sophisticated. He pioneered modern ethnolinguistic techniques of Bible translation and made a careful, comparative study of the psychology and sociology of religious conversion. During his years in New Caledonia from 1902 to 1926, as a scientifically minded observer he amassed a considerable body of ethnographic texts, mostly vernacular transcriptions of ritual language. As a professor in Paris (1932–1953), Leenhardt eschewed the wide, synthetic approaches of a Mauss or Lévy-Bruhl. He remained close to the field he knew intimately, New Caledonia and especially the Houailou (Ajie) language area. In his teaching the returned missionary practised a method of scrupulous semantic analysis of ritual and everyday language, carefully guiding students through the complex senses and situational interconnexions of a tongue he profoundly understood. In effect, he tried to communicate a vernacular experience: in the words of Michel Leiris, his first student, ‘one had the impression of being in the presence of a real Melanesian’. The veteran’s aura was not diminished by the fact that he was known to be in the bad graces of both the New Caledonian colonial government and his own mission society. He had, it seems, been some kind of an ‘indigénophile’, a pro-native agitator whose thinking on political and evangelical issues had been too ‘advanced’ for his colleagues.

Mauss, who said of Leenhardt that ‘this pastor and former teacher of Protestant theology was freer of all prejudices and preoccupations in his famous studies of Oceanic peoples than any other ethnographer or sociologist of his time’ (Gurvitch 1955: 107), quickly turned over to him half of his teaching at Hautes Études and ensured his succession in the post. But if Leenhardt was appreciated (though not always understood) by his contemporaries, he has been largely forgotten by his successors. His unusual ideas on religious phenomenology were effectively swamped in the structuralist wave of the fifties and sixties; his distinctive, and in many ways exemplary, ethnographic record remains largely unknown.

Leenhardt’s best-known book, Do Kamo: person and myth in the Melanesian world (1947), has just appeared in an English translation (Leenhardt 1979). This record of a series of lectures given at the Collège de France is a good example of Leenhardt’s late style of ethnological reflection. It does not, however, give much of a feeling for the extensive documentation upon which it is based. Prior to Do Kamo Leenhardt had written a sequence of five scholarly books on New Caledonia: four large volumes in the publication series of the Institut d’Ethnologie and a general overview, Gens de la Grande Terre (1937). The present article will fill in this background to Do Kamo, stressing the early documentary phase of Leenhardt’s career. Drawing on private papers, it will sketch out the conditions in which his ethnography was accomplished, underlining the collective, dialogical nature of the enterprise. Leenhardt’s research experience, that of a missionary-ethnographer, was, of course, unorthodox from an academic standpoint. Some of the strengths and weaknesses of his methods will be indicated below. The uncommon, though far from unique, example of an evangelist seriously committed to ethnography may throw comparative light on accepted practices of fieldwork. It will, in any case, contribute to a belated tendency—best exemplified in a number of
recent writings by Rodney Needham—to evaluate without prejudice the scientific contributions of evangelists.3

The evangelist goes to the ends of the earth to convert the heathen, the ethnographer to study them. The social scientist, seen from the missionary's point of view, has little deep concern for the people he investigates. He is a godless man, a moral relativist, and usually a transient. The ethnographer has harsher opinions of the evangelist, who to him is narrow-minded, ethnocentric, and unscrupulous in fomenting cultural chaos for the sake of questionable religious changes. The conflicting opinions are as true as most stereotypes. They are not very useful in understanding a person like Leenhardt, whom we must be careful not to think of as a missionary-turned-anthropologist. It never occurred to him to separate sharply the two callings (although he usually avoided mixing the different modes of discourse). His blindness to what is normally considered to be a contradiction of roles and purposes was not, as we shall see, without its advantages.

In order to assess Leenhardt's contribution it will be necessary to treat fieldwork as collective work, thus calling into question certain assumptions about the writing of ethnography. In particular, the concepts of description, interpretation and authorship prove to be inadequate to the processes involved.

One of Leenhardt's informants was the regional chief (grand chef) of the Houailou area, Mindia Néja. In 1914 the missionary wrote to his father describing the progress of his research into local kinship.

For the last three weeks I've been trying to get through to Mindia about his family, but he's hard to reach. Every Friday I've spent a long morning with him at the home of the Neoueo nata [the Melanesian pastor]. The first time it was hard to get him to relax. He explains to me that we whites are too stupid to understand their kinship, and we the missionaries, too preoccupied with their souls to be interested in their obscure relationships of the flesh. I was able to lead him on with a few questions in the heart of the subject. On the second Friday he had prepared a little sheet which he brought along, after making me wait an hour. This last time he was waiting for me at the nata's, having written out four large pages.4

The situation is familiar. We see an informant's initial resistance, the frustrating delays, leading questions, and finally, with luck, the establishment of a measure of confidence and mutual interest. Mindia Néja posed particular problems as a source of ethnographic information, for Mindia's family relationships were facts of immediate political importance.

There is, of course, a political dimension to all knowledge of local life gained by a white in a situation of colonial dominance. Thus Mindia had a priori reasons for apprehension of the whites and their 'stupidity'. The recording of a genealogy required the divulging of names and relationships previously hidden to those—white and Melanesian rivals—who might make political use of them. Mindia's influence as grand chef throughout the Houailou area was based on his kinship relations. But his position was far from secure. He had consolidated his power only a few years before Leenhardt's arrival in New Caledonia, with the support of an anti-Catholic administration in Noumea. Mindia at that time became a Protestant convert, allying himself with a new
form of Christianity lately imported by Melanesian pastors (natas) from the nearby Loyalty Islands. Soon the political winds shifted; the ethnographic interviews of 1914 took place in the midst of a protracted struggle between colonial government and Protestant mission. The administration had just created two new 'chiefs' in the region as an attempt to undermine Mindia, the natas and Leenhardt.

The grand chef's relationship with his missionary was ambiguous. The two, though allies, kept their distances. Leenhardt knew that Mindia's 'conversion' to the reformed faith was a shifting mix of sincere belief and political expediency. Mindia was the 'pagano-protestant' (in Leenhardt's inelegant but accurate phrase) par excellence. The missionary was not opposed to Mindia's legitimate traditional political roles; he defended the chief's right to authority throughout the Houailou area. Leenhardt felt that government should stay out of tribal politics as much as possible, and that the Protestant Mindia was the most authentically qualified via traditional family relations to exercise power in the region. The missionary's position, like that of the chief, was a mixture of sincere belief and political expediency.

The two men needed to be able to trust one another. The establishment of mutual confidence took many years; but in the series of interviews in which Leenhardt records Mindia's genealogy we are witnessing a moment of breakthrough. The grand chef entrusts the missionary with the foundations of his power, facts which Leenhardt will use to defend Mindia's rights against his rivals and the administration. At the very least, it has become clear that the missionary will not turn these facts against his informant. Leenhardt, for his part, requires a secure Protestant grand chef in the vicinity of his harassed mission. Maurice Leenhardt's research was not always conducted in so tense a situation as that of early 1914, but it was never without immediate political consequences.

Leenhardt's relation with Mindia Néja was clearly political, as it was also openly evangelical. Few anthropological researchers will remember being accused of too much concern with their informants' 'souls'. Leenhardt, however, in making an ethnographic informant of Mindia, had clear ulterior motives, going beyond the aims of science or politics. He was interested in the man himself, his inner morale. Inevitably, Mindia became a test case for Caledonian Protestantism in the eyes of all. In local tradition the chief was a sacred personage, 'older brother' and mediator with the ancestors. His 'word' (parole) was the unity of the clan, and thus the state of his 'soul' was of far-reaching importance; it expressed the power of the group. Leenhardt wanted Mindia to curb his taste for political intrigue; and he hoped that the chief would eventually bring himself to accept monogamy. We see this moral concern as Leenhardt continues his account of collecting Mindia's genealogy.

We got down 7 or 8 generations, and you can clearly see all the descendants who perished when the whites arrived. It's so striking that it looks like a crime. I'm going again next Friday to finish the job, but my real goal was to get closer to Mindia. In this I haven't succeeded yet. He's opened up a bit, but [only] on exterior matters, and on things he can use to know and judge his world better. But as soon as I try to press him, I get that full and entire affirmation, those 'It's true' replies, so complete that there's nothing to do but fall silent....
Leenhardt interpreted the *grand chef*'s passivity when pressed on personal issues of morality and belief as a sign of demoralisation. In another letter he notes that among the more savage unconverted "if you talk of religious or moral truths the traditional man may get his back up, but that's always proof that he has understood." In *Notes d'ethnologie néo-caldonienne* (1930), Leenhardt published three photos of Mindia: one taken in 1872 reveals a slim young man in full traditional regalia, turban, feathers, penis sheath, ceremonial axe; the second from 1898 shows the dignified, full-fledged *grand chef*, wrapped in fine skins, spears in one hand, in the other an umbrella. But the third taken in 1912 finds him in a photographer's studio, leaning in a stylised Western pose on a false balustrade. He wears a full French military uniform, three medals, and an expression of discomfort and confusion. The exterior changes are obvious. But what has happened within? What had been the fate of that pride so clearly manifest in the second photograph and so important to the man and his race? This was Leenhardt's concern. For Mindia there was no returning to the early snapshots. He was not going to be left in peace by encroaching cattlemen, farmers, priests and gendarmes in Melanesia's most heavily colonised island. Native Caledonians in 1914 could no longer choose to be alone. Thus it was important to discuss seriously the old and the new, the problems of shifting moralities. Such talk, leading to self-conscious change, was the programme of the liberal missionary.

We should be wrong to separate this programme from his scholarly ethnography. Leenhardt hoped that the very process of recording information about tradition would stimulate reflection on the part of his informants. While preserving the old in written form, they would distance themselves from it. But reflection would not entail total rejection; ethnographic attention must give value to specifically Melanesian ways of being—in the eyes of both native converts and whites. If something like this process of thinking or interpreting custom could take place, then the interests of scholarship and of the mission would overlap.

It is clear that for Leenhardt, Mindia Néja's 'soul' came first, his kinship second. (Of course the two were not, in practice, clearly separable, a fact Leenhardt was to elaborate at considerable length in *Do Kamo* and elsewhere, and which Mindia, in his resistance to the missionary's personal questions, was perhaps trying to make clear.) But if ethnography could be a means to a broadly religious or moral end, does this invalidate it as science? Our judgement in such matters must be based on specific situations, not a priori assumptions. There is no reason here to suspect that Leenhardt's genealogies were less accurate than those which might have been collected by a supposedly neutral secular observer. Indeed, the intrusive effect of the missionary's openly religious aims might well have been less than that of a person whose motives could not be so clearly understood. In any case, Mindia Néja would not, in 1914, have delivered his genealogy to any other European in New Caledonia. And the details of his lineage have been of considerable importance in writing the political anthropology of the Houailou region (Guiart 1963: 19–77).

Missionary ethnography is, of course, limited by the nature of its informants, a missionary tending to rely only on members of his 'flock'. This was true of
Leenhardt to a large extent, though he was familiar with unconverted and, to a lesser degree, with Catholic groups. Fortunately, however, many of his best informants were close to the old ways, and Leenhardt's concept of religious conversion discouraged radical rejections of the 'sinful' past (Clifford in press). One is in any event reluctant to press the objection too far, since it is always difficult to assess the representative status of anthropological informants. Ethnographies do not, typically, reveal very much on this score; and there exist few studies such as T. N. Pandey's of 'Anthropologists at Zuni' which precisely connect individual ethnographers with specific local factions (Pandey 1972).

The most telling complaints against missionary ethnography centre on its amateur quality, unevenness and the strong ambivalences toward 'paganism' which tend to colour its descriptions. Such criticisms are frequently justified. However, there exists a wide qualitative spectrum within which individual contributions must be judged. One should recall Codrington's admission of fault—a fault shared by Leenhardt: 'Under the circumstances of [my] inquiries, much of the worst side of native life may be out of sight, and the view given seem more favourabe than might be expected; if it be so, I shall not regret it' (Codrington 1972: vii). If unevenness and prejudice (both positive and negative) are faults in participant observation, then many ethnographies other than those written by missionaries must be criticised. The works of a Junod, a Crazzolara, a Schärer or a Leenhardt will probably stand the test of time, with its continually changing priorities, as well as those of any academic anthropologist. An ethnographically-inclined missionary is particularly well situated to amass information on such important topics as culture change over extended periods, the content of religious belief systems and the full semantic, grammatical complexities of native languages.

The critical test for the missionary-ethnographer is, finally, his or her personal ability to allow the two disciplines to coexist, in co-operation where possible, without interference where not. Leenhardt, whose family milieu was steeped in both piety and natural science, was able, when necessary, to hold apart the projects of evangelism and empirical research. He could do this precisely because in the final analysis, an analysis beyond his comprehension, they formed a concert. He believed, in the words of his father, a theologian and eminent geologist, that 'facts are a word of God' (Leenhardt 1957: 414).

This is not to suggest that science and religion were never in practical conflict. In 1915 Leenhardt wrote ruefully of an opportunity missed because of opposing loyalties. He had never been able to observe from beginning to end a full-scale grand pilou festival. This important ritual was being abandoned throughout the island, at least in its most elaborate forms which included the gathering of clans from a wide region for gift exchanges, feasts, discourses and religious dances conducted over a span of several days or even weeks. In neighbouring Canala Leenhardt finally had his chance:

It is certainly the last authentic [pilou] which will be performed in the region where Houailou is understood. For some time now I've been meaning to go study a pilou in order to understand it as a whole. Canala is pagan: no one would be scandalized if I attended; it was
perfect. But what should I find [there] but a nata [pastor] allowing his son to learn the dances along with the rest of his flock. I have to intervene and renounce my project so long in preparation. It’s likely I’ll never have another chance.9

Leenhardt had no objections to being present as an observer (if not precisely a participant-observer) of traditional rituals. He was far from the sort of missionary who attempted to forbid or forcibly to disrupt the practices of the unconverted. He did, however, claim moral authority over Protestants, those who, in theory at least, had made a basic break with tradition.

In this instance Leenhardt’s role impeded direct observation of an authentic grand pilou. But he managed to learn much about its nature indirectly, through interrogation of old people, collection of texts recording traditional rituals, observation of local ‘small pilous’ and traditionally influenced Protestant ceremonies. Leenhardt came to approve the smaller celebrations more wholeheartedly than the large multi-clan gatherings which, in a colonial situation, tended to end in drunkenness. The degeneration and gradual disappearance of the island’s most important social ritual worried Leenhardt. He hoped the pilou might be preserved at the local level and ‘translated’ into Christian ceremonial practice.10 In 1922 he published an extensive description of the pilou in L’Anthropologie where he called it ‘the rite maintaining the unifying force of the people’, or, in the words of a Melanesian informant, ‘the movement of the needle that ties together the sections of a straw roof, to make only one roof, only one “word” (parole)’ (Leenhardt 1922a). Leenhardt’s ambivalences about the pilou certainly obstructed to some extent his ethnographic description of it. His evocations lack something in immediacy as a result of his difficulties in attending, and he may have a tendency to play down the political importance of the grand pilous. But anyone reading his accounts, still the best available (either that of 1922, or in Notes d’ethnologie néo-calédonienne and Gens de la Grande Terre), will see that no hint of disparagement creeps into the assessment.

Much of Leenhardt’s ethnographic description from the 1920’s and 1930’s portrayed the interrelatedness of custom in a more or less cohesive society, set often in the ‘ethnographic present’. But his ethnography was never limited to a synchronic perspective. Leenhardt was on the lookout for cultural change, which he always portrayed: grimly, if it were a matter of customs being shattered by colonialism, enthusiastically if he saw custom re-creating itself in transformed conditions. For example, in the chapter on the pilou from Gens de la Grande Terre, Leenhardt is not content to show the ritual dances and speeches as reiterations and expressive reinforcements of traditional alliances, offerings to the maternal uncles, glorifications of the paternal clan and so on. He stresses, too, the possibilities for creative expressivity in the rituals, as in one of his favourite anecdotes:

During one of the last grand pilous around Ponerihouen, a Nébaye fraternity devised a totemic dance much remembered since. In it groups of dancers were coming and going gracefully, meeting, stopping, veering, forming a circle in imitation of the mullet fish that come from all around to feed on algae carried by the current. Suddenly there is a rifle shot: the dancers lie still, their bellies up. The explosion and falling dancers represent a fatal explosion of dynamite in the midst of a school of fish. A mime of tragedy, it signifies the death of the mullet totem
and its group in the dislocation of native society under the shock of civilization (Leenhardt 1937: 168).

In another account of this dance Leenhardt tells of it being performed for the governor of the colony. The missionary-ethnographer’s primary object of study was ‘living culture’ (Leiris 1950; 1973), changing, translating itself, to itself and to others. He was not tempted to confuse cultural authenticity with cultural purity.

This dynamic conception of cultural process was reflected in Leenhardt’s manner of constituting ethnographic texts. Like Boas and Malinowski, he believed that a crucial aspect of fieldwork was the collection of a large corpus of vernacular transcriptions. The advantage of such an approach, as Helen Codere (1966) and Dell Hymes (1965) have argued, is to render the ethnography open to scholarly reinterpretation (and to reappropriation by native speakers). As Codere says of vernacular texts: ‘the ethnographer has acquired data in which he is out of the picture, in comparison to the degree of his involvement in the presentation or elicitation of most ethnographic data’ (1966: xv). Leenhardt’s relations with his best informants are comparable to those of Boas with the Kwakiutl George Hunt: he taught them to transcribe and interpret their own tradition.

Leenhardt considered his entire scientific oeuvre as an elaborate exercise in translation. His first three volumes for the Paris Institute of Ethnology form an exemplary cluster. The Institute had been founded in 1925 by Marcel Mauss, Paul Rivet and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. It became the nucleus of professional anthropology in Paris, leading in 1936 to the establishment of the Musée de l’Homme. Professional fieldwork came relatively late to France, and the founders of the Institut d’Ethnologie felt acutely their country’s backwardness. In 1925 there was an embarrassing paucity of excellent empirical work for the new organisation to publish. Thus when Leenhardt returned to Paris, Lévy-Bruhl and Mauss immediately encouraged him to publish the fruits of his extensive research.

Compared with Malinowski’s works bearing evocative titles such as The sexual life of savages, Argonauts of the western Pacific, Coral gardens and their magic, Leenhardt’s first three volumes seem tentative and restrained. Their titles, Notes d’ethnologie néo-calédonienne (1930), Documents néo-calédoniens (1932), Vocabulaire et grammaire de la langue Houaïlou (1935), communicate a sense of incompleteness and localism. In these works Leenhardt makes few generalisations about ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’ ways. He provides not an overall interpretation of Melanesian life (that would come later) but rather a selected set of tools with which a serious reader could work his way into the life of archaic New Caledonia. Leenhardt’s caution reflected his feeling that French philosophical anthropology had in the past been too quick to erect its theories of ‘primitive mentality’ or ‘elementary forms’ of social life, without sufficient allowance for concrete experience seen from ‘the native point of view’. For Leenhardt this elusive viewpoint was not accessible through fieldwork.
‘rapport’ or empathy; nor was it the result of decoding ‘textualised’ behaviour. What was involved was a productive, collective work of translation which, because of its specific form, could not easily be dominated by a privileged interpretation. Leenhardt’s first three works for the Paris Institute of Ethnology, while forming an ensemble, have an open quality absent from most holistically organised ethnographies. They are designed to immerse the reader in specifics, never far removed from vernacular transcription; they provide twelve hundred densely packed pages of data along with the means for their translation.

The centrepiece of the trilogy is Documents néo-calandoniens. Here a portion of Leenhardt’s textual data is presented. On a typical page, the Houailou is given along with interlinear French equivalents; then a free rendering is attempted. Finally, footnotes, often detailed, direct attention to complexities of meaning and areas of likely confusion. This does not, however, exhaust the tools Leenhardt brings to bear on his texts. The two companion volumes play essential roles. The Documents—legends, orations, songs and slices of life—are not comprehensible without some sense of their setting in overall New Caledonian society and ritual. This contextuality is provided in Notes d’ethnologie néo-calandonienne, a book which its author intended not primarily as an integrated portrait of a society, but as a kind of introduction to the Documents and to the perplexities of translation. Nor, in Leenhardt’s view, was it sufficient to describe an institutional/ecological context for the vernacular documents. Leenhardt considered the language itself to be a prime source of insight. The third volume of his trilogy, Vocabulaire et grammaire de la langue Houailou, makes accessible much of Leenhardt’s knowledge of a Melanesian tongue. As a reference in reading the Documents, its five thousand multi-faceted definitions provided a wide access to the semantic complexities and situational variations of New Caledonian discourse and ritual practice. ‘Dig into (Leenhardt’s) dictionary’, Mauss advised his students; ‘he transports you into another world’.

Leenhardt’s three books together were intended to constitute ‘an initial, well-classified documentation for use in studying archaic mentality’. In according centrality to the vernacular texts, the ethnographer felt that they represented the truest available source of Melanesian expression. He based his belief on the specific manner of their ‘collection’. Documents néo-calandoniens is a group enterprise. Its table of contents gives the names of fifteen different ‘transcripteurs’. What makes these texts different from most vernacular documents is the fact that here the ethnographer was not present and actively involved in the primary moment of transcription—that process in which the transition from an oral to a literate mode is most abrupt, and thus where the risk of distortion is great. Leenhardt’s texts were not, as were Malinowski’s, for example, spelled out in the presence of the inquisitive ethnographer. Instead, they were composed in private by informants using a native tongue in which they had recently learned to read and write. Leenhardt encouraged a wide variety of people to record in school exercise books any traditional legends, ritual discourses or songs that they knew well. When the cahiers were ready, the missionary discussed their contents with the authors, a long and arduous
process, for the language was often archaic and the writing highly idiosyncratic. Of course ‘mistakes’ could provide opportunities for insight beyond the codifications of the written. Sometimes, too, the texts obtained in this *laissez-faire* way would not fit any category of legend, song or formal speech: for example, the personal story of ‘Jopaipi’, an account of a trance, a slice of mythic life that Leenhardt would later subject to repeated analysis in his descriptions of the Melanesian *personnage* or ‘participatory’ self (Leenhardt 1932: 334–6, 1979: 158–9).

There are disadvantages to Leenhardt’s procedure of transcription. First, the texts obtained were divorced from the immediate context of performance. Also, informants translating oral eloquence into insufficiently mastered writing might settle for inaccurate transcriptions and short-cuts for expressions which someone more competent would be better able to capture. Writing, finally, implied a considerable degree of self-conscious distance from the customs described, and thus could inject an element of abstraction and over-intellectualisation into the primary ethnographic evidence.

Set against these disadvantages are the considerable benefits of Leenhardt’s procedure. An informant is under less immediate pressure and guidance than someone called upon to dictate into a microphone or compose his words in the presence of a frequently rushed transcriber who ultimately cannot avoid the use of leading questions. Moreover, in Leenhardt’s multi-stage method, the interpretation of custom could become a dialectical process of translation. A preliminary textualisation, a ‘thick description’ in Geertz and Ryle’s phrase, would be initially fixed by the native speaker.14 Then this formulated version would be discussed, extended and cross-checked in collaboration with the ethnographer. The starting point would not be the anthropologist’s interpretive descriptions, but rather those of the informant, considered here in the role of indigenous ethnographer. Leenhardt was, in any case, less interested in treating culture as an object of description than as if it were actively ‘thinking itself’. Here scholarly practice paralleled mission work. In each domain, Leenhardt tried to involve himself in Melanesians’ conscious observations and reflections on their changing life.

We can see the desired process most fully in the case of his best informant, Boesoou Erijisi. Most ethnographers have relied on ‘privileged informants’, though it has not been customary to write in detail concerning these crucial intermediaries.15 Indeed, access to ‘the native point of view’ depends only partially on the interpretation of described or textualised behaviour. Beyond this, representatives of distinct cultures enter into some kind of interlocution concerning beliefs, a collaboration that builds on familiarity, mutual interest and trust. The collaboration must, to some degree, invent its own language adequate to the transmission of nuances and complex information. As a direct result of this interlocution a text is produced, and the text is always something more than description, however thick. It is a process of translation—of ‘making it new’, in Pound’s formula—where both parties may learn something about themselves by means of the other. Leenhardt’s contact with Boesoou Erijisi included more than a quarter-century of mutual instruction: an extreme example of ethnographer–informant exchange, to be sure, but worth
considering as an ideal type. It is condescending and false to assume that only the ethnographer derives knowledge about custom from fieldwork collaborations, or that the texts and interpretations so constituted are meaningful only to the author of the eventual ethnography.

Boesoou was, for Leenhardt's purposes, the perfect informant. He was born around 1866 into a family of chiefs, much esteemed in the Houailou area. His tribal initiation, he recalled, occurred at the time of the great New Caledonian insurrection of 1878. Thus he came to manhood at a moment when traditional ways began to come under severe stress. (Suppression of the rebellion was followed by three decades of intense European settlement.) A man of serious and reflective temperament, he was distressed by the plight of his people. Demoralised, expelled from ancestral lands, the Melanesian population declined by over thirty per cent. during this period. When in the 1890's Houailou became a foothold for Loyalty-Island Protestantism, Boesoou saw a hope—for it was known that on the Loyalty Islands (where white colonisation was forbidden) there was peace and less alcoholism. Boesoou became a Protestant. Then when Leenhardt arrived and began a small school for pastors, Boesoou Erijisi was among the first class of sixteen. At around forty years of age he was the oldest of the group and the first New Caledonian pastor to be consecrated. A man of great experience and tact, he was an invaluable assistant in all aspects of mission work.

It was in translation and ethnography that Boesoou was indispensable. From 1912 to 1925, he composed a long series of notebooks covering a wide variety of traditional custom. Boesoou had been a fully initiated sculptor and an organiser of pilous. His texts were remarkably precise and detailed, containing (as Guiart, who is still working with them, has stressed) not merely accurate records of custom but important interpretations. Translating them was, however, a complex task, the language being frequently elliptical and obscure. The old pastor and his missionary would spend long hours going over the notebooks, the margins of which were soon filled with Leenhardt's annotations. Boesoou set his own pace. His answers came slowly, after much thought. Leenhardt often had time to write a letter in the interval separating a question from its answer. Sometimes the answer came much later.

The missionary had learned patience—how to make queries without pressing for answers—in his practice of Bible translation, a search for what have come to be called 'dynamic equivalences'. Leenhardt worked for fifteen years on a Houailou New Testament that, like his ethnography, was a collective enterprise. He raised translation problems in sermons, classes, conversations, whenever he could, and listened for the answer—sometimes he waited years. For example, in his early essay on Bible translation, Leenhardt tells how he finally arrived at a Houailou term for 'redemption' (Leenhardt 1922b: 214–15).

Previous missionaries in the Loyalty Islands had rendered the concept in terms of exchange, an exchange of life: that of Jesus for ours. But in Melanesian thinking actual equivalences were demanded in social exchanges: it remained unclear just how Christ's personal gift could redeem all mankind. So unclear was it that Melanesian pastors gave up trying to explain the concept they did
not understand and simply employed the term ‘release’. So the matter stood, with Leenhardt driven to the use of cumbersome circumlocutions, his explanations lacking concreteness. Then, during a discussion of Corinthians 1:30, he heard Boesoou Erijisi use a surprising expression. The term nawi referred to the custom of planting a small tree on land cursed either by the blood of battle or some calamity. ‘Jesus was thus the one who has accomplished the sacrifice and has planted himself like a tree, as though to absorb all the misfortunes of men and to free the world from its taboos.’ Here was a concept which seemed to render that of ‘redemption’, while reaching deeply enough into living modes of thought. When Leenhardt tried out the translation on his pastors and students they were, he reports, overjoyed by the ‘deep’ translation. Leenhardt too was delighted, and moved, to witness what he saw as the Gospel being returned to its original concreteness.

The missionary’s summary of the translator’s role is not without relevance for ethnographic relationships: ‘The work of the translator is not to interrogate his native helpers, as if compiling human dictionaries, but rather he must solicit their interest, awaken their thinking, ... He does not create a language; this is composed by the native himself; it is the product and translation of his thoughts’ (Leenhardt 1934). The translator records a social, expressive process he has initiated and over which he has very limited control. The translator attempts to seize a moment of intercultural thinking. He acts within language’s normal process of reform and rebirth in encounter with other languages.

Time here is of the essence—Melanesian time, structured in rhythms of exchange. Ethnographic time is too frequently otherwise: constrained, linear, the researcher ‘collecting’ data instead of ‘making’ it in collaboration with informants. At the very least, fieldwork requires a certain complicity (a better term, perhaps, than rapport). But complicity is not reciprocity, though it may be part of reciprocity. A question initiates exchange; an answer confers debt. The ongoing process of gift and counter-gift falls into measured rhythms, a tempo which does not always synchronise with the academic calendar or with the span of research grants. A reply to a query may come decades later. Naturally it is somewhat inappropriate to compare an experience like Leenhardt’s—spanning more than three generations and involving active political and spiritual alliance with his informants—to a characteristic academic sojourn or even series of sojourns. But the comparison may encourage us to rethink the social processes by which ethnographic texts are created, returning to the word ‘data’ its etymological root in ‘things given’.

A full theory of the production and interpretation of the ethnographic text remains to be written. But it should, in any case, no longer be possible to speak of data as something found or discovered, like a note in a bottle. Nor should it be sufficient to conceive of initially-formulated data as a kind of problematised ‘description’. The word tends to preserve a privileged authorial standpoint, as does ‘interpretation’. Much ethnography has to do with description and interpretation, but not all of it and certainly not, as has been suggested above, its central, interpersonal engagements.

There is, finally, a political dimension to conceiving of the ethnographic text as a more open, processual, plural document. In situations of rapid change
from oral to literate styles of life there may be no more useful long-term service an ethnographer can perform than to encourage vernacular transcriptions. An *oeuvre* such as Leenhardt's is today unusually accessible to reappropriation by Melanesians since much of it is, in still obvious ways, *written* by Melanesians. One wonders why this sort of production is not more generally recognised as an essential part of fieldwork. The time-consuming and collaborative nature of the transcription enterprise presents certain obstacles, but they are not insurmountable. The issue should at least be raised, especially as fieldworkers search for ways to make their activity more reciprocal. Can ethnographers afford to leave this sort of work, fundamental to the future development of indigenous literatures, to missionaries? Should they not be finding ways to ensure that some at least of the writing produced in the field be accessible and useful to those who are often, in effect, its co-authors?

**NOTES**

1. Personal communication: the portrait of Leenhardt is derived from Leiris and other surviving students; see also the reminiscences of Poirier (1955) and Routhier (1955).
2. For a complete account of Leenhardt's career, see Clifford (1977). On his political activities, see Guiart (1955; 1959; 1977).
4. Leenhardt to his parents, January 29, 1914, manuscript letter. (All unpublished material, unless otherwise indicated, is in the possession of R. H. Leenhardt, 59 Rue Claude Bernard, Paris.)
5. Leenhardt's mission practice was significantly influenced by the work of his pastoral corps. The *natas* were Loyaltians whose evangelical message—following traditional pathways of inter-island exchange—preceded Leenhardt's arrival by a decade. (Clifford 1977: Part 1; Guiart 1955.)
6. On Mindia's *word*, see Leenhardt (1979: 114–18, 137).
7. Leenhardt to his parents, October 31, 1903, manuscript letter.
8. This attitude pervades his letters; see also Leenhardt (1938).
9. Leenhardt to his parents, November 6, 1915, manuscript letter.
10. Leenhardt to Jeanne Leenhardt, July 15, 1918; August 17, 1918; manuscript letters, quoted in Clifford (1977: 263–9).
11. 'Textualisation', a precondition for interpretation, is a process by which unwritten behaviour, beliefs, oral tradition, ritual actions, etc., become 'fixed' (as something meant), 'autonomised' (separated from a specific authorial intention), made 'relevant' (to a contextual world), and 'opened' (to interpretation by a competent public). Behaviour so transformed becomes susceptible to 'reading', a process no longer dependent on interlocution with a present subject. These terms are proposed by Ricoeur (1971).
12. From notes taken at a course in 1935–36, Mauss archives, Musée de l'Homme, kindly provided by C. Rugafiori.
13. This account of the three volumes as a whole, centred on the *Documents*, is based upon Leenhardt's own description contained in an extensive *curriculum vitae*, prepared around 1950.
14. Geertz (1973: ch. 1). On page 19 Geertz discusses ethnography as the 'inscription' of social discourse, the means by which (following Ricoeur) an event becomes an interpretable meaning. But if, as Geertz implies in his famous analysis of a Balinese cockfight (esp. page 450), culture is always already interpreted, one may extrapolate that it is also already inscribed. (A ritual occasion is already a 'text'? How does the phrase 'oral literature' manage to mean anything?) In these cases, ethnography is less a process of inscription, the passage of some essential oral event into textuality, than a procedure of transcription, of 'writing over'.
15. An important exception is Casagrande (1960), though it is significant that these portraits found their place in a separate, 'popular' collection rather than within the ethnographies that
they made possible. See also Liberty (1978) which contains portraits of anthropological informants and Fontana (1975). Introduction to a re-edition of Russell's The Pima Indians, which discusses the book's hidden co-author, the Papago Indian, José Lewis. Rabinow's recent discussion (1977), while it provides an excellent view of ethnographer-informant relations as constitutive of ethnography, does not entirely escape the convention it criticises, that of compartmentalising such reflections. A book that goes farther in implicitly questioning ethnographic 'authority' is Griaule's Conversations with Ogotemméli (1965). For an excellent recent example of a frankly co-authored work see Majnet & Bulmer (1977).

16 See R. H. Leenhardt (1976), which provides biographical details and a list of Boesou's notebooks, their contents, and the corresponding sections of M. Leenhardt's Notes d'ethnologie and Documents néo-calédoniens.

17 Personal communication; on the quality of Leenhardt's informants as independent researchers see Guiart (1963: Introduction).

18 See, particularly Nida and Taber (1969: 22–32), which sets out principles developed by Nida in a distinguished career as linguist and Bible translation theorist. 'Dynamic equivalence' translating looks for verification to the response of receptors. '... a translation of the Bible must not only provide information which people can understand but must present the message in such a way that people can feel its relevance (the expressive element in communication) and can then respond to it in action (the imperative function) (page 24). (Nida was a reader of Leenhardt's Do Kamo; see his Customs and cultures: anthropology for Christian missions (New York, 1954), passim.; and as editor of The Bible translator he published a translation of Leenhardt's article of 1922 on the Houailou New Testament: Vol. 2, No. 3, July 1951, and No. 4, October 1951.) Many of Leenhardt's general ideas may be found in recent pages of Practical Anthropology (now Missionology: An International Review). For example, an extension of 'dynamic equivalence' principles to the structure of indigenous churches (a very 'Leenhardtian' perspective) is Kraft (1973: 39–58).

19 J. Guiart, writing self-consciously in a Leenhardtian tradition of ongoing research in New Caledonia, has made some of these points in a recent polemical prise de position, 'L'ethnologue et l'Océanien' (1976).

20 Geertz (1973: 9). In his discussion of 'thick description' Geertz's examples of field data are highly textualised and interpretively overdetermined. Just how they were constituted as texts, by and with whom, in what conditions, is not considered. A collection of cockfights becomes an 'ideal' cockfight, which is meaningful because it is not typical. See Boon (1977: 3–4).

21 See, for example, the use of Leenhardt's work by Tjibaou (1976a; 1976b).

22 A more serious obstacle is the reluctance of publishers to print extensive vernacular documentations; the present model of the sharply focused, 250-page ethnography constricts the 'openness' of the text. So, to mention only one example, A. Weiner's recent Women of value, men of renown (1976), while it excellently complements Malinowski's Trobriand monographs, is not likely to be endlessly, and creatively, reinterpreted as are the works of its predecessor, who produced large compendia as Coral gardens, Argonauts, and the Sexual life of savages and who was able to include in his works textual data that he did not theoretically comprehend. For an excellent recent discussion of these, and related, issues see Beidelman (1979: 511–12).

23 The problematising of authorship and of the text recommended here has, of course, become a commonplace of modern criticism, especially of the 'poststructuralist' variety. The literature is extensive; for short statements see Barthes (1977) and Foucault (1977).

REFERENCES


——— 1938. La vieille Calédonie et le Musée de l'Homme. *Études mésanéennes* 1, 11–16.


