

Elmdoners and the structure of other villages

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Abstract. In her book on the English village of Elmdon, the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern identifies an assumption made by villagers: that much as Elmdon has a set of real Elmdon families, long associated with the place, so other villages also have their real families. I present an argument in favour of the assumption; the argument is an informal model.

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I knew of a magic ring

That appeared in the world with a ping

And whoever who wore it would sing!

For various people in the English village of Elmdon, the paradigmatic case of a real Elmdon villager is a person who was born in the village, into one of the old families of the village and still lives in the village. Or at least that used to be a common view. In her book writing up the findings of fieldwork done in the 1960s, the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern tells us:

An image of village society, shared by Elmdoners and newcomers alike, thus sees the established villagers as belonging to families long associated with the place. There is an assumption, I think, that other villages consist of ‘real’ families in the same way as Elmdon does. People claiming origins in other places may imply that their family is

associated there as a ‘real’ member, but may also be making a more limited statement as to where their parents lived or where they were born, if their names carry no particular local association. (1981: 14)

What do we make of the assumption identified? Anthropologists sometimes regard it as their task to dispute universal assumptions and the assumption identified is one: the assumption that all villages have this membership structure. Take any village, or at least any village beyond a certain age (100 years say): there are families long associated with the place and the paradigmatic case of a real village member is a person born in the village, into one of those older families, who still lives there. Perhaps others count as well, but only in this case can there be no reasonable doubt – that is what is meant by “the paradigmatic case” here.

It seems to me that the assumption is harder to dispute than it looks. There is an argument for roughly the social structure attributed by the assumption identified. It relies on these commitments.

Beyond individual premise. It takes work to establish a village and it is beyond the energies of any individual. If an individual desires to establish a village they need help.

Family help premise. The main help an individual with a desire to establish a village is likely to get is from their family. So if an individual is heavily involved in establishing a village, then we can infer that their family is involved. When a village is established, the work was done by one family or a set of families.

Privileges premise. Once work has been put in by a family to establish a village, that family desires privileges over newcomers and takes appropriate means to realize that desire. For example, newcomers would like to use the well as well and

priority is given to families who helped bring the village into existence.

The combination of these premises leads to a village structure in which there are families long associated with any older village and they have a privileged place – I think I have not captured every premise involved, but readers should be able to nevertheless grasp how this structure arises. However, there is an obvious counterexample: long ago the government set up a village and various people purchased houses there. But the Elmdoner who makes the assumption may propose that any such villages are the exception rather than the norm.

Reference

Strathern, M. (with a foreword by A. Richards and an epilogue by F. Oxford). 1981.

Kinship at the core. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.