

English village studies: criteria for counting as real Elmdon

Background. Elmdon is a village in Essex, on the Cambridgeshire-Essex border. Fieldwork was done there by University of Cambridge students in the 1960s and presented in book form by Marilyn Strathern. There is a concept there of being real Elmdon, but different people apply the concept with different criteria. These are criteria suggested by the book, with my own definition to begin with.

Literal-minded criteria. The anthropologist Audrey Richards, who had a cottage in Elmdon, suggests a literal-minded analysis (1981: 16):

A person is real Elmdon if and only if: (i) they are real, as opposed to a character from a fiction; (ii) they live in Elmdon.

Habitation-relatedness criteria. Two people Strathern refers to as outsiders seem to rely on the following criteria (1981: 5):

A person is real Elmdon if and only if: (i) they live in Elmdon; (ii) they are part of a set of related people in Elmdon, who comprise the majority of its population.

Birth-habitation criteria. Various people encountered in fieldwork suggest the following analysis (1981: 6, 9):

A person is real Elmdon if and only if: (i) they were born in Elmdon; (ii) they live in Elmdon.

Origins-habitation criteria. According to Strathern, questions are asked about place of birth as a means of asking about family origin. One can be born in a village but actually the origins of one's family are in some other village – that is the village of one's family (1981: 6, 12). This gives us:

A person is real Elmdon if and only if: (i) they were born in a family originating in Elmdon; (ii) they live in Elmdon.

The habitation-length criterion. The length of time one has lived in Elmdon seems relevant for various people (1981: 5-6). The older Mrs. Hammond does not regard herself as real Elmdon, but she has spent most of her life in Elmdon, and is regarded as a real village person by a commuter's wife (1981: 5). Another Mrs. Hammond regards her sister-in-law as a newcomer, because she has only been there for 40 years.

Puzzles. (a) The sister-in-law is judged to know nothing about Elmdon, a judgment she agrees with (1981: 6), so how can the anthropologist make any claim to knowledge? Strathern does not note this puzzle, but was presumably aware of it. (b) Also the category of real Elmdon is not said to affect day-to-day interaction, so why is it used – a puzzle Strathern notes (1981: 7)? Richards implies it affects (1981: 16).

Reference

Strathern, M. (with a foreword by A. Richards and an epilogue by F. Oxford). 1981. *Kinship at the core*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.