

Book Reviews

FRANCIS ZIMMERMANN, *The jungle and the aroma of meats: an ecological theme in Hindu medicine*, Comparative Studies of Health Systems and Medical Care 20, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. xxiii, 254, \$30.00.

Zimmermann's book was first published in 1982 and it is its subsequent reputation among English-speaking Indologists that has called forth this recent translation. His purpose is to unwrap Indian, Ayurvedic medicine in terms of the various forces that have brought its complex conceptual content and basic structural features into being. For Zimmermann, this means a two-sided investigation of the manner in which classical Hindu scriptural writings of the ancient past, and various later commentaries, express the formation of a geography of settlement and thus of ecological relationships in terms of which a praxis-oriented taxonomy of space, and a zoology and botany—in effect, a pharmacy—and physiology took form. In these respects, scriptural writings can be said to mark the cumulative impact of complex, continent-specific, socio-historical-cum-ecological forces in terms of which Ayurvedic knowledge gained content and form, and medical thinking and practice can be described and explained. A very sensitive treatment of language—words, imagery, and syntax, sensitive to circumstantial variations across South Asian territory and to temporal change resulting from the advancing frontier of settlement—is called forth as Zimmermann works through the successive tasks of reconstructing this knowledge base, its articulated classifications of things plant and animal, climatological and topographical, and of the changing and variable vegetable covers with their related faunas, as primary cover became displaced by expanding agricultures. “Botany” and “zoology” come to comprise languages of foods and medicine, prescriptions and proscriptions, descriptions of states and conditions, of micro-geographical medical decision-making about finely judged symptoms and cures, what should either be consumed or excreted/exhaled in order to reconstitute a healthy body-context relationship (“the universe is a kitchen”).

In many respects, the book is a *tour de force* of style and craftsmanship, marvellously constructed, coherently and consistently designed, an argument that works through all the components of what the author has considered to mark the dimensions and facets of a problem of knowledge—an interdisciplinary exercise. The author's acknowledgements to his present translator, Janet Lloyd, are well deserved—the text retains the sense of cumulative complexity and dialectic verve—so that it is disturbing to find that the publishers have eschewed normal ethical practice in omitting her name from either title page or colophon.

Are there grounds for doubt? “Framework” is the question at issue. A little disciplinary history must be introduced in order to ask some critical questions of method that are now, rightly, attracting attention in the social sciences and humanities. Although concerned to reconstruct an object field as much natural science as human, *The jungle and the aroma of meats* is a work of anthropology and classical Indology that betrays many of the critical problems that have come to seem central to these divisions of study. The book was put together, the research conducted, then published, during the latter years of the high period of French structuralism. Zimmermann was a student of Louis Dumont and Madeleine Biardeau of the *Centre d'Etudes de l'Inde et de l'Asie*, Paris. Dumont is especially renowned, far beyond Indological circles, as the author of *Homo hierarchicus*, a book that analyses the conceptual foundations of the “caste system” and its material ramifications in Indian life. It is a case study of what is claimed to be a unique societal type among the larger class of holistic, non-individualist, social forms preceding modern bourgeois individualist society. The influence of Dumont was at its highest point in the years in question. His work was seen as having constituted a decisive shift towards a structuralist and holistic analysis of Indian culture and society. However, with perspective, *Homo hierarchicus* is now coming to be viewed less as a shift than a culmination representing, in a particularly coherent manner, the overlapping conceptual concerns characterizing the past histories of both Indology and anthropology. These concerns, once taken for granted, are no

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longer completely credible; they have fallen from grace: India the unique society to be understood in terms of Hinduism and caste without residue; the very word “system” a symptom of an anthropology whose mechanistic and organicist metaphors have become serious cause for questioning.

Zimmermann’s treatise reflects this past in two ways: (i) there are essential parallels between his strategy and the Dumontian (and Chicago) approach to life in South Asia—the aspects and the whole (or Zimmermann’s “total social fact”). The specific choices and restrictions of source materials, the notion that things practical express mental determinants, the idea that a sub-subject like medicine can itself be sufficiently expostulated as a hierarchic sub-part of a larger, singular and unified, socio-conceptual whole, Hinduism, are examples. Context is indeed relevant but the term is an umbrella word beneath which fall many different, even opposing, scholarly approaches, in this case the *exclusive* sense of subsumption within a larger coherent system of thought.

Thus, the objection is not that Zimmermann has particular views but that, (ii) he treats Dumontian knowledge and the larger framework of Indological and anthropological assumption as mere facticity (see, for example, the unpalatably assertive style of the introduction). Duality and polarity for the terms of analysis, and more specifically the purity-impurity polarity, which underwrites the Dumontian “caste system” and is the axial criterion underlying Zimmermann’s medical object field, are treated not as controversial elements of our own knowledge fields but uncontroversially as words of empirical description in terms of which the description of things “other” can proceed. Despite all the topological and human variation across South Asia’s vast spaces with which Zimmermann’s analysis of language and taxonomy is, as earlier remarked, in part concerned, we nonetheless find “India” reduced to that assumed unit-container of discourse inside of which is disposed a homogenous religious sociology.

These perspectives and frameworks are so controversial today that to read a treatise composed and based upon their facticity would surely have merited a fresh introduction putting the book into a modern context. To take one of several possible objections, many historians no longer regard South Asia as forming an isolable or autarchic portion of socio-cultural development separate from the rest of the world. Its peasant-based social forms, its languages of right and social bonding, of field, crop and measure, are found to be remarkably eclectic, a product of the dense traffics in persons, ideas, words, techniques, tools, and images across the Asian continuum that characterized medieval and early-modern times, and which came to influence various aspects of local-specific knowledge, including ideas of sovereignty and forms of association and expression. Nor is caste found to be the only form of socially significant bonding, nor Hinduism the only resource of legitimization and idea. Should we accept on trust that medicine, even the Ayurvedic, had successfully resisted such forces and influences during these formative and dynamic centuries? It may have done; the point is not that Zimmermann (or Dumont) is necessarily wrong but that his framework too tightly encloses the circle of what he attends to and interprets. It is not enough to assert the intellectual consensus of the late 1970s without a fabric of supportive reasoning.

This would suggest a need for Zimmermann to confront the basic structure of assumptions in terms of which his argument is put together, convincing for an influential proportion of one “tradition-bounded” body of specialists but much less so for many others. The danger is the degree of *unqualified* authority which a book in an unfamiliar field may present to “outsiders”—say to historians of medicine and those seeking comparative material. The blurb on the dustjacket tells us that the book will be relevant for philosophers of science but it is precisely a sense of distance from the collective means and forms of our own intellectual approaches to an object field—the marks of that philosophy—that seem absent in this book; a philosophy of science takes form when statements and ideas are no longer accepted as transparent renderings of materiality.

However, this critical reading is *not* intended to invalidate Zimmermann’s thesis but to make what I believe to be the more decisive point that as presently grounded the value of a brilliant

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argument is seriously qualified by assumptions and concerns that no longer carry an automatic conviction. This is the rub.

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DANIELLE JACQUART and CLAUDE THOMASSET, *Sexuality and medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson, Oxford, Polity Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. vii, 242, illus., £27.50.

To write adequately on the history of sexuality and medicine in the Middle Ages is far from easy. Many of the texts on which such a history can be based survive only in manuscript or in outdated editions, and a considerable knowledge of a variety of languages and dialects is needed to read the texts, let alone interpret them to a modern audience. The combination of a professor of linguistics and a historian of medicine thus offers a neat way out of this primary difficulty. The authors introduce us to writers in Latin, Old French, German, and Spanish, and are equally at home in discussing Isidore's etymologies as in explicating complicated and almost unintelligible technical terms derived from oriental languages. Their English translator is equally competent, although something seems to have gone wrong on p. 135, and some of the sexual advice is still left in the obscurity of a semi-learned language (p. 224).

The authors take us from the anatomy of the body, as described in words and later in anatomies, through physiology, to sexual practices, both licit and illicit, and finally to the wages of sin, hysterical malady, sexual diseases, and the deadly encounter with the venomous, but beautiful maiden. They discuss courtly love (which they argue was far from the spiritual purity beloved of the Victorians, but culminated in coitus interruptus) as well as contraception and abortion ("what everyone knew about . . ."), and intercourse for pleasure as well as procreation. They also endeavour to trace the effects on medical learning of successive tranches of material translated from the Greek (but the table, p. 22, is wrongly titled and Niccolò did not translate from the Arabic). They call on the advice of penitentials as well as that of pharmacopoeias, of popular legend as well as of learned treatise. In short, this is an excellent guide to the written sources on the history of sexuality in the Middle Ages.

This literary bias is both its strength and its weakness. Far too often, one has the impression of a learned debate far removed from life, of a bloodless pursuit of literary chimeras, in sharp contrast to more recent studies of sexuality in other periods, e.g. Camporesi's *I balsami di Venere*. The survey of anatomy says much about texts, but little about the formal procedures for obtaining female corpses or the regulations for students to observe such dissections in fifteenth-century Italy. The medical authors cited move almost in a historical and cultural vacuum (on p. 24, the chronological relationship between [Moschion] and his source Soranus is reversed). English readers will look in vain for some of Chaucer's ribaldries, or for any detailed discussion of the evidence of art and of its value to the historian.

Within its limits, however, this is a valuable guide, and many non-medievalists will be grateful to the authors for the way in which they lead them elegantly through the thickets of theological and philosophical speculation, or lucidly expound the differences between the Aristotelians and Galenists on the topic of the female sperm. They have made a very sound beginning, and subsequent historians will be able to rely confidently on their editorial labours.

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DAVID B. RUDERMAN, *Kabbalah, magic, and science: the cultural universe of a sixteenth-century Jewish physician*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. viii, 232, £23.95.

This book centres on the life and ideas of the late Renaissance Jewish scholar and physician Abraham Yagel (1553–c.1623). To place the subject in perspective, the author begins with an interesting biographical chapter in which the life of Yagel and his financial problems offset by his Cabalistic and scientific pursuits are viewed against the declining political and economic fortune of Italian Jewry in the late sixteenth century.