Mary Douglas

A Very Personal Method

Anthropological Writings Drawn from Life

Edited by Richard Fardon

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2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

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#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Chris Rojek
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Cover design: Lisa Harper
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed by: Replika Press Pvt Ltd, India

First published 2013

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012936391

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4462-5468-4
ISBN 978-1-4462-5469-1 (pbk)

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About the author

Mary Douglas (1921–2007) remains one of the most widely read social anthropologists of her generation. Celebrated as both a literary stylist and an anthropological thinker, the books of her mid-career, *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970) quickly became acknowledged as classics. Douglas began her research career in Africa but soon developed her interests in religions and classification comparatively. These insights became the theoretical approach to different forms of society that she initially called 'grid and group theory', and later 'cultural theory'. The intention was straightforward – to find predictable relations between ways of organizing socially and the cultural bias of those organized. Douglas began to work intensively, and often collaboratively, on western society. An investigation of British food habits was broadened into an anthropological theory of consumption more generally. Moving for a period to work in the USA, she embarked on a study of the burgeoning environmental movements there, applying to them her general theory which related perceptions of risk to trust in the wider organizational environment. While continuing to write extensively on social theory, Douglas's later decades were devoted to close reading of the first five books of the Old Testament to radically re-envision the societies which gave rise to them. She continued to work collaboratively on contemporary questions of climate change, risk, terrorism, gun control, witchcraft movements, and the role of women in organized religious life, to mention only a few of her very catholic interests. Consistently, her ability to find similar patterns in the familiar and unfamiliar allowed her to explain complex anthropological ideas to a wide readership. A week before her death, Mary Douglas was invested as a Dame of the British Empire at Buckingham Palace.

Mary Douglas's literary executor, **Richard Fardon**, is Head of the Doctoral School and Professor of West African Anthropology at SOAS, University of London. He was a student at University College London throughout the 1970s when Mary Douglas taught there. Richard Fardon's intellectual biography of Mary Douglas, published by Routledge in 1999, was updated by a Memoir in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 2010.

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION
Drawn from life: Mary Douglas's personal method

Richard Fardon

Mary Douglas (1921–2007) was the most widely read British anthropologist of the second half of the twentieth century. Her writings continue to inspire researchers in numerous fields in the twenty-first century.[1] This volume of papers, first published over a period of almost fifty years, provides insights into the wellsprings of her style of thought and manner of writing.

More popular counterparts to many of Douglas's academic works – either the first formulation of an argument, or its more general statement – were often published around the same time as a specialist version. These first thoughts and popular re-imaginings are particularly revealing of the close relation between Douglas's intellectual and personal concerns, a convergence that became more overt in her late career, when Mary Douglas occasionally wrote autobiographically, explaining her ideas in relation to her upbringing, her family, and her experiences as both a committed Roman Catholic and a social anthropologist in the academy. The four social types of her theoretical writings – hierarchy, competition, the enclaved sect, and individuals in isolation – extend to remote times and distant places, prototypes that literally were close to home for her. This ability to expand and contract a restricted range of formal images allowed Mary Douglas to enter new fields of study with startling rapidity, to link unlikely domains of thought (through analogy, most frequently with religion), and to accommodate the most diverse examples in comparative frameworks. It was the way, to put it baldly, she made things fall into place.

The previously uncollected essays anthologized here as 'a very personal method' present Mary Douglas's ideas biographically, and make available some sparkling writing that might be unfamiliar even to readers who know her work well.

Familiar feelings

The volume begins with an extensive late autobiographical lecture that reflects on the place of her academic work in the context of a long life. Its opening sections on her Roman Catholic upbringing, and her debt to the grandparents responsible for the early care of herself and her sister while their parents were in colonial service in Burma, had initially been intended as the Preface to an uncompleted collection of essays on hierarchy for which Mary Douglas also wrote the essay 'Granny' as an Epilogue. 'Granny' is a tribute to the Protestant woman who undertook to her daughter-in-law, Mary and her sister Pat's dying mother, to bring them up as Roman Catholics; it is also a meditation on duty, commitment and constancy, as well as the way that the shape we have given our own life is discovered towards its end. In deference to her intentions, this collection uses these two pieces – 'A feeling for hierarchy' and 'Granny' – as its bookends. Mary's title for the opening essay was chosen carefully, as was her way with titles. Our deepest convictions strike us as 'natural', part of our fundamental disposition, hence what she first experienced as a 'feeling' she had towards hierarchy, a sense of importance only subsequently unpacked intellectually. The predisposition towards hierarchy, the welcome she always gave it, was part of a *habitus* into which she had been absorbed by early experiences against which she never rebelled for long.

This, however, was not the whole of Mary's family background. The next two pieces introduce her 'invincibly agnostic' father, a fanatical fisherman whose writings she edited, with filial duty, as well as increasing delight in the formal Edwardian essay, into the final book completed in her lifetime. Typical of Mary's facility in conjoining autobiography and anthropology is the essay on gender symbolism for fly fishermen that she composed while editing her father's papers. A familiar feeling then explored and understood academically.

The final occasional piece in this part offers a vignette of Mary and her artist sister, Pat, bringing their distinctive insights to a short sojourn with the circus that occurred just after the Second World War in which they both undertook war service. The sisters were close, similar in their stature and neat appearance, but in many respects entirely different. Mary, fond of wine and meaty food dishes served to entertain visitors around her dining table; Pat happier in solitude, and abstemious to a fault. Her daughter Jo (Joanna) feels her mother was the family prototype of the isolate in Mary's four social types.

Pat's illustrations appeared in many of Mary's books, including this one, the cover of which depicts the Brothers Grimm story of the 'The Golden Fish', one of three large murals that Pat Tew (later Novy) undertook for Pentley Park (now Templewood) Primary School in Welwyn Garden City (in 1950–51) as part of the commitment of Hertfordshire County Council to post-War educational provision and the programme of 'Art for All' in new-build schools between 1947 and 1953. In those heady days of renewal, a small proportion of the building budget (0.3%) was set aside for artworks, typically commissioned from young artists (like Pat, who had recently graduated from the Slade School of Art). Welwyn Garden City was exemplary of progressive thinking about housing: founded in 1920 as the second Garden City in England, it had been designated a new town during the post-War reconstruction in 1948. 'The Golden Fish' is a traditional, if somewhat misogynistic, tale about greed: a poor fisherman lands a golden fish with the power of speech which he returns to the sea without condition. He is chided for this by his irascible wife who sends him back to plague the fish with ever more outrageous wishes, until, exasperated, it restores the family to its initial poverty. Pat has represented the fisherman, like her father, as an angler and fly fisherman. She commented at the time, 'This is the version where the wife wants to be king, emperor, pope in turn and finally wants to control the sun and the moon. In the left corner is the husband showing his disapproval. He kept repeating "No good will come of this", but of course, it was the emperor ordering him, he had to go back and ask for more' (*Welwyn Hatfield Times*, Welwyn Garden City school murals revamp, 19 June 2011).[2] It's a story attuned to Pat's preference for modest demands upon life. Mary would note that, for all its attractions, powerlessness to influence events was one of the drawbacks of the isolate's lifestyle. I suspect this is the kind of moral tale that would have been familiar to both sisters, furnishing artistic inspiration for Pat and evidence of personality types for Mary.

Thinking about Catholicism in Lele religious experience

Mary Douglas's ethnographic experience in the Belgian Congo (later Zaire and now the Democratic Republic of Congo) was relatively brief by the standards of many of her fieldworker contemporaries. Yet the effect on her was enduring. Readers familiar with her writing about Lele historic religion, particularly the cult of the pangolin, or scaly anteater, might be unaware of her writings on the impact of missionization on the Lele. An early, 'very toned-down', contribution to the subject, in a volume edited by Adrian Hastings on religious minorities, is reprinted as the first chapter of the second part of this collection. If this essay was less outspoken than she later wished, it is nonetheless mildly critical if read attentively. Recalling it in the terms quoted above, she wrote on 4 May 2000 to Adrian Hastings in response to an essay he had sent her that, 'My own idea about the not fully intended exclusion of Africans from this history [referring to Hastings' editorial on the last three decades or so of African Christian Studies[3], Ed.] is to put the finger on the idealist and intellectualist concept of Christianity which avoids or excludes any confrontation with how people normally use religion to solve their personal problems.' This is a perspective associated with earlier anthropologists' studies of historic African religions, notably the nexus of the occurrence of misfortune and the accusation of sorcery or witchcraft in an effort to fix responsibility for it. A brief return to Zaire in 1987 had made Mary Douglas aware of recent brutalities in the Church-led witch-finding movements among the Lele, excesses which she laid at the door of the Church's failure to answer people's needs. The second chapter in this part of the collection makes available for the first time her immediate reactions to this experience, written in the heat of the moment in 1988, a moderated version of which she only published a decade later (in 1999) after considerable persuasion by the then editor of the journal *Africa*, Murray Last (personal communication 2011).[4] In part, her caution was to protect some of those involved, whom she thought vulnerable. Their names, however, can now readily be googled on the web, and even feature in an otherwise cursory French-language Wikipedia article.[5] As Douglas saw it, 'The old religion was entirely monotheist, but the one, unique divine creator worshipped by the Lele ancestors, their grandfathers and fathers, was now set up in opposition to the Christian God. The Christians associated the deity of their pagan parents with the devil and his minions ...' (see note 4, Douglas 1999: 178). Rather than abjuring anti-sorcery movements and sorcery itself, as European missionaries had urged them to do, Lele cast their old religion as sorcery, and their priests embarked on 'Catholic anti-sorcery' (see note 4, 1999: 184).

This particular instance sparked a more general reflection that Douglas published for the wider readership of the Roman Catholic journal *The Tablet* in 1990. That the subject concerned her deeply is made evident by her return to it a little over a decade later, in 2001, in the course of a named lecture delivered to the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, when she advocated the inclusion of African deities in the Catholic worldview as a way of forestalling their demonization. Mary Douglas's Roman Catholicism was deeply held but for all that not necessarily in step with orthodoxy, and her opinions as a Catholic bore the impact of her anthropological beliefs as strongly as her anthropological opinions reflected her Roman Catholic beliefs.

The concluding paper of this section[6] also calls upon Central African ethnography to draw a contrast with contemporary western societies. The African case derives not from the Lele on this occasion, but from the writings of Anita Jacobson-Widding on the Buissi of southern Congo. Douglas's argument, a plenary address to the European Association of Social Anthropologists in 1994, had been delivered first as a 1989 Gifford Lecture at the University of Edinburgh under the title 'Claims on God'. As she notes, the argument did not entirely fit into the book of those lectures, *Leviticus as Literature*, that had been published in 1993, though parts of it appeared there. Nor does it surface fully in the lectures in honour of Aaron Wildavsky that were later co-authored with Steven Ney and published as *Missing Persons*.[7] In keeping with the interests of their dedicatee, that book concentrated more on political economy than on religion, and took up claims on the individual rather than on God. She does note, however, that, 'African anthropology has many beautifully written examples of how exterior and interior persons are appointed with the furnishings for elaborate forms of social intercourse' (Douglas and Ney 1998: 14), an evocation that allows her to highlight by contrast the prevalence of '*Homo oeconomicus*' as a simple model of the rational individual susceptible to being held accountable for actions in 'Western culture'. The argument of 'Cloud god and shadow self' triangulates ideas both of the person and of supernatural powers in ancient Israel, the contemporary West, and Central Africa, and does so with particular attention to less articulated concepts of godhood and personhood: images of emptiness or of protean substance – like fire, cloud or shadow – arguing that these provide scope for the religious imagination and, doing so, are affordances of religious experience and speculation. Cross-culturally these affordances, and hence the place and scope of religious imagination, will differ in both quality and extent.

Taboo and ritual

The two mid-career works *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970)[8] are Mary Douglas's best known books. The gestation periods of the two differ: *Purity and Danger* has antecedents traceable at least to her second Lele fieldwork in 1953, when the germ of her notion of dirt as 'matter out of place' was set out in her fieldwork notes in terms very similar to those used in the book thirteen years later.[9] *Natural Symbols* was composed in much greater haste – and annoyance – as a response in part to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Both were preceded in *New Society*, then a new magazine of wide circulation, by articles that overtly linked the soon-to-be-published academic works to contemporary issues that had caught Douglas's attention. In the case of *Purity and Danger*, the link was made via a widely-reported suicide in Durham Cathedral[10] that had required a complex 'rehallowing' of the Cathedral before it could be reopened. *Purity and Danger* was to culminate in a quite different series of self-willed deaths, including that of the Dinka master of the fishing spear buried alive in his old age because of the threat his declining powers and a natural death posed to his community. The title, 'Taboo', recalls that of a lecture series delivered by the Czech exile anthropologist, Franz Baermann Steiner, that Mary attended at the University of Oxford. In 1956, the series was published posthumously as a book of the same title, edited by Laura Bohannan, one of Mary's Oxford contemporaries.[11] Its impact on Mary was profound, as she recalls in the memoir of him reprinted here.

The second article for *New Society*, under the forthright title 'The contempt of ritual', was an early version of some chapters of *Natural Symbols*, written in the months immediately following the closure of the Second Vatican Council in December 1965. The title was reused when Mary was invited to deliver the St Thomas Aquinas's Day Lecture at Blackfriars at the University of Oxford. The fact of this lecture, published in 1968, largely being recycled into the early chapters of *Natural Symbols* goes a long way to explaining the tone of that book. The framing of the lecture is provided by its first three paragraphs, not replicated in the later book. The opening paragraph is worth drawing to particular attention as an uncompromising response to the Second Vatican Council:

> The Church today is engaged in a great crisis of self-examination. It is looking at its claims, its traditional role, its theology. It is revising its rituals. This reforming effort is intended to bring Christian worship fully into the twentieth century. But, alas, the zeal for coming up to date proceeds without recourse to one of the most relevant critical techniques this century has produced, I mean sociological comparison. Hence some naïveté in the religious reformer about his own role. He seems not to suspect how much his views are the product of his secular environment. Nor does he consider whether the faithful are free to follow his proposals, though they also must be constrained by their own social environment. More important, he does not seem to foresee any difficulty in abolishing some forms of worship and retaining others. (originally 1968: 475, p.148 in this volume)

The central argument of *Natural Symbols*, a book addressed to anthropologists, concerning sociological insights into variation in socially shared attitudes towards the importance of ritual observances, begins life as an admonishment to Catholic reformers, and their inability to understand the lives of some of their parishioners. Douglas moves quickly to establish her counter-instance to the 'over-weaning rationality' and 'unwitting' Protestantism of reforming clerics. Bog Irishism is the devotional style of the 'perverse ritualist' who places more importance on the 'taboo' of abstention from meat on Fridays than on any other religious observance. The intention to replace this kind of ritualism with a self-conscious intellectual commitment is, Douglas argues, another step in the progressive decline of magical beliefs that must eventually come to include the communion sacraments and their transubstantiation. Adherence to embracing symbols, she goes on to argue, goes along with the social experience of membership of close and bounded social groupings, members of which exert pressure to conformity on one another. This is one quarter of what will become the four quadrant theory of cultural types in her later writing. By the end of the 1960s, we see the theory in an early and essentially binary stage which, with hindsight, is impeding development of the fourfold scheme. At this stage, Douglas still conceives of closed social groups in terms of the presence of social structure,