

Marcel Mauss and the Arctic

The Arctic as a special place . . .
for the production of anthropological knowledge

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Marcel Mauss



Marcel Mauss

1872 – 1950

Source: Marcel Fournier (1994)

Marcel Mauss and the Arctic: a surprising subject?

- Only one of his essays explicitly focuses on Arctic peoples
- Mauss is remembered for more general contribution: anthropology rather than ethnology
- Other anthropologists are remembered for their studies on Arctic peoples

Marcel Mauss and the Arctic: a major subject!

- Arctic peoples as the subject of an important essay: “The Seasonal variations of the Eskimo”
- The Arctic as a long-lasting interest and a decisive point in Mauss’ career
- Arctic studies as a paragon for Mauss’ works, methodology and legacy

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- 1872 — Birth in Epinal
- 1895 — *Agrégation* in Philosophy
- 1890s — First papers (mostly in religious sciences and especially among non-western populations)
- 1901 — Director of studies at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, chair “History of the religions of non-civilized peoples”
- 1903 — “On some primitive forms of classification” (with E. Durkheim)
- 1906 — “Seasonal variations of the Eskimo: a study in social morphology.” (with H. Beuchat)
- 1925 — “The Gift”
- 1931 — Professor at the Collège de France
- 1935 — “Techniques of the Body”
- 1947 — *Manual of Ethnography*
- 1950 — Death in Paris

Arctic peoples at the core of an important essay: The Seasonal variations of the Eskimo

- The Inuit “civilisation”: composed of several settlements
- Social morphology: crystallization of the collective life in a society. All its material substrat. All phenomenas binding it to time and space.
- Variation of seasonal morphology; cannot be explained solely by biological or “natural” factors.
 - The Cree, peoples of the Labrador, etc., live in colder regions only with tents
 - The following of the game may explain the variation in places and styles of living but not that of collective representations and social behaviours

	Summer	Winter
<i>housing</i>	scattered tents	gathered big houses
<i>collectivity</i>	one family	settlement (several families)
<i>collective place</i>	none	<i>kashim</i>

Effects

<i>religion</i>	no religion (or strictly limited to private rites: birth and death)	continuous religious exaltation; "winter is a kind of long feast"
<i>social behavior</i>	Separate individualism	Collective living, sexual licentiousness
<i>taboos</i>	Reindeer, salmon	walrus

- Law : existence of (winter) clan with law implications (no death revenges inside the clans but vendettas between clans)
- Women exchanges inside the clans
- Remnants of the Summer family during winter: family property (e.g. lamp).

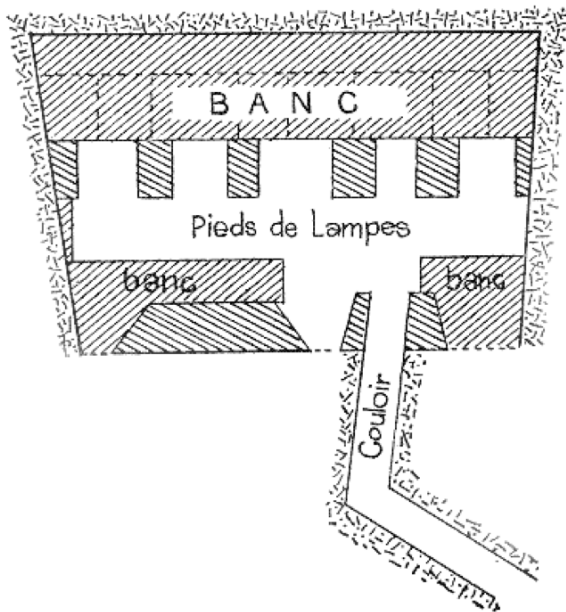


Fig. 2. - Plan de la maison d'Angmagssalik (H. B.)

The Seasonal variations of the Eskimo

Conclusion

- A double morphology among the Inuit, even “two successive civilisations”
- Qualitative differences between the two are due to quantitative differences in the intensity of social life
- A more general scope for the theory: the intensity of social life varies along the year, compensating its excesses
- Among the Inuit, this phenomena is a “crucial experiment”
 - The link between material substrate and social facts is highlighted by the extreme amplitude of the climatic change — a human-environment relationship quite specific to the Arctic
 - close to a *ceteris paribus* reasoning

The Arctic throughout Mauss' career

The genesis of the Seasonal variations' essay: a long-lasting and collective work

- The influence of Durkheim
- The Inuit in EPHE seminars
- Several students mobilized : René Chaillié, Maxime David, Stefan Czarnowski, Henri Beuchat (readings, maps, drawings, statistics)
- A lot of reviews and readings (especially Boas and Nelson)

The Arctic throughout Mauss' career

Seasonal variations: a milestone in Mauss' scientific career?

- Cf. B. Saladin d'Anglure, B. Karsenti, C. Lévi-Strauss
- Object: reducing complexities to simpler social structures
- Towards the study of *total* social facts

The Arctic throughout Mauss' career

Arctic peoples as a recurring focus point

- Mauss' long-lasting interest for Arctic peoples — through readings, talks, objects. . .
- In the EPHE seminars
 - 1903-1906: Inuit
 - 1909-1913: Chukchi and Koryaks
 - 1932-1937: Chukchi, Koryaks, Inuit, Buryats, Nivkh, Nanai.
- In many articles
 - Seasonal variations, The Gift, Manual of Ethnography, etc.
- Permanent contacts between Mauss and Arctic anthropologists (direct and indirect)

The Arctic throughout Mauss' career

The Gift: a major contribution to anthropology based on the Kwakiutl (among others)

Main sources:

- Potlatch, described by Boas among the Kwakiutl
- Kula, described by Malinowski among Melanesians

Decisive observations about the gift as a relationship

- Gift binds giver and receiver together
- Gift is supposed to be voluntary and gratuitous, while in fact compulsory.
- Refusing a gift is impossible

Conclusion

- There is a triple obligation: giving, receiving and giving back
- The gift is a “total social fact”, involving all institutions and facets of social life

The Arctic throughout Mauss' career

Marcel Mauss on its own way of working

"As to my own work, I am not interested in developing systematic theories. [...]

***I simply work away on my materials, and if, here and there a valid generalization appears, I state it, and pass on to something else.** My major interest is not to set up some broad general theoretical scheme that covers the whole field (an impossible task!), but only to show something of the dimensions of the field, of which so far, we have only touched the edges. We know something, a little here and there, that's all. Having worked in this way, my theories are scattered and unsystematic, and there is nowhere that one can find them summarized. [...]*

After I have completed a task, my disposition is to forget it, throw it aside, and then go on to something else" in MURRAY, Stephen O. (1989). "A 1934 interview with Marcel Mauss", *American ethnologist*. 16(1), 163-168.

Arctic studies: a paragon for Mauss methodology and legacy?

Armchair anthropology

- Chronology
 - A dominant methodology until the first decades of the XXth Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Mauss. . .
 - It changed during the First world war. Fieldworkers took the advantage: Malinowski, Boas, Rivers, Jenness
- A methodology not to be caricatured
 - A deep knowledge and understanding of the cultures
 - Complementary with fieldwork (but the Arctic was difficult to reach)
 - The difficult question of the **sources**: what nature? wherefrom? primary or secondary? trustable or not? questionable?
All documents were archived, exchanged, discussed, debated.

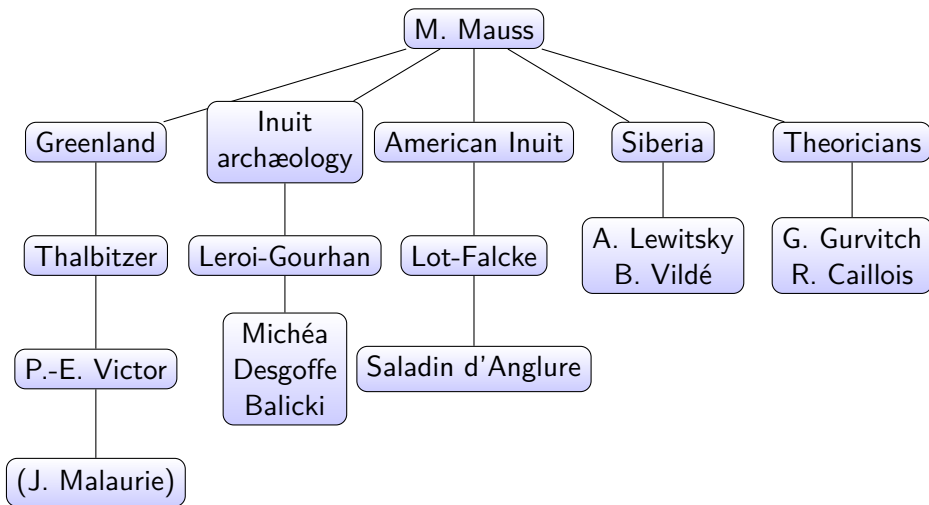
Mauss' success in armchair anthropology

Jenness 1910s: “their social organization and their religious life continue unchanged during both periods”

Jenness to Mauss, 1925: “With passing years, and perhaps a little more wisdom, I have reached the conclusion that I really know very little about the Eskimos, in spite of living amongst them for three years, and that **an armchair philosopher whom the average fieldworker too often disdain frequently has a truer and more rounded viewpoint of native culture than the man who is on the spot.** If I could rewrite my book on the Copper Eskimos there are many things about which I should be less positive, and many things which would require considerable revision. I am glad you did not take my ebullition against your theory too seriously. I still think the case overdrawn, but the theory was undoubtedly valuable and opened my eyes to many things that I would otherwise have overlooked.”

Mauss scientific legacy

A preview of Mauss' legacy through some of his students



Conclusion

The Arctic as a special place for the production of anthropological knowledge

- The Arctic is a recurring theme in Marcel Mauss' research and teachings.
- Through Arctic studies, Mauss and his students produced decisive knowledge about the Arctic (people and their environment) and set up a wide frame of research, helping produce important concepts and theories. They put the Arctic at the core of some major anthropological conclusions
- Mauss' research on the Arctic exemplify his methods and more generally a certain way of producing anthropological knowledge
- Mauss' working relationship to the Arctic gives way to raise important questions about anthropology: the frontier between ethnography and anthropology; the nature and uses of the sources; the reality checks; the status of indigenous peoples.

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Thank you !

