

## **The Importance of the Prehistory of Indo-European Structures for Indo-European Studies**

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I would like to urge fellow-scholars in the Indo-European field to move forward in a new direction or, at any rate, to recognise that there are fresh possibilities opening up and that there is no need to be trapped in a paradigm established more than half a century ago. The findings of Georges Dumézil, to my mind, should be characterised as neither right nor wrong but as partial. They have been attractive to some scholars while they have been found unsatisfying by others. The reason for this dichotomy can be traced to their partial nature. Many scholars besides Dumézil have located tripartite structures in Indo-European sources and they are hardly in doubt. But what is the explanation for them?

Let us look at where we stand, taking Dumézil's initial suggestion of a primary connection with the three social groups of priests, warriors and herder-cultivators as our starting-point. To put it strongly, this is nonsense, the reason being that social classes developed at a later stage than the proto-Indo-European period. There is no need to argue this point since Dumézil later dissociated himself from his earlier suggestion (Dubuisson 1991). However, his response to the need to revise was a partial one, and he took up only one of the ways in which his initial position could have been modified. Logically, there were two possibilities open to him when he changed his stance. Either the concepts of the sacred, physical force and prosperity and fertility (his three 'functions' that he had linked to the social classes) were actually free-floating ones—and this is the position he took—or alternatively they were linked to other, more archaic, components. Interested scholars today have before them both the first option (as offered by Dumézil) and the alternative that was put forward by Kim McCone and has been argued for by McCone and myself. This is the view that the three

concepts are linked to three stages of life identified by a society with a system of age grading. McCone's most substantial discussion (1987) was published in German in a collection of conference papers and is perhaps not as widely known as it deserves to be. My own study of the topic appeared in the journal *Emania* (1997; cf. 2001, 2004) and this allowed me to pay some special attention to Irish material as well as to work out in detail what would have been involved if the Indo-European tripartite structure had arisen from an age-grade society, something that I was able to explore through the practice of East African pastoralists, including the Maasai. McCone's work is linguistic and deals with historically known materials which could be taken to indicate age grades, while mine is structural and is not claimed to reflect conditions in historical times but to give an insight into a prehistoric state. An age-grade society of the type suggested would have had an identification of physical force with young men, prosperity and fertility with mature men and the sacred with old men.

I will turn next to Dumézil's partial statement in another area that is often discussed in relation to structure—horizontal space as emanating in the four directions from an ego-point in the center. Again, we are given a sense of floating, for, in Dumézil's view, the triad was not tied to this spatial structure. Dumézil thought of the directional structure of horizontal space as a universal one older than, and separate from, the Indo-European formulation (Dumézil 1973: 9). It was left to Rees and Rees (1961: 111-113, 122-133), Allen (1999: 247-249) and myself (1990: 8-19), to articulate possible connections between components of the Indo-European triad and the directions of space and bring them together so that the concepts are not free-floating ones but are anchored in the spatial structure. In whatever way this was done (and more than one suggestion has been made), the key point for this discussion is that an anchoring like this is what we would expect to find in a primitive classification system, and I totally agree with Allen's view (2000: 44-45, 58-59) that we can trace in the Indo-European historical evidence the remnants of a primitive classification.

If a primitive classification is involved, we need to equip ourselves to handle the relevant material, much of which will be of a non-linguistic nature. I suggest the use of a reference set and, since this proposal was first put forward at a

conference held in Edinburgh in October 2005,<sup>1</sup> we can identify it as the ‘Edinburgh reference set’. The advantage of a ‘reference set’ (as I discovered from the use of this term in the study of mitochondrial DNA, where there is a ‘Cambridge reference set’) is that scholars can use it without commitment to any particular hypothesis. The reference set is one string and the components of other strings can be identified as being identical to, or varying from, components in it. This, of course, offers opportunities for discourse on points of comparison.

It is my own current view that the set of components in the Edinburgh reference set is actually the one that is valid for the prehistoric society from which the historically known Indo-European societies were derived, but the point about a reference set is that it can be used without acceptance of any particular position. Alternative views can be expressed as differences from this set and the transformations that can be expected to have happened over the course of time differently in different branches can also be expressed as divergences from it.



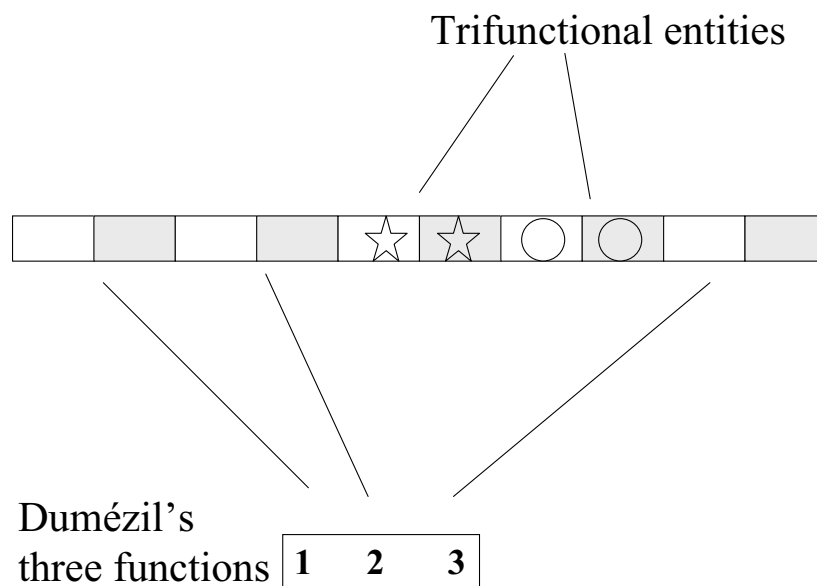
Figure 1. The Edinburgh reference set.

The series of ten can be related to horizontal space; it allows for two components in each of the directions and the center, with the central components being placed in the middle of the series as numbers 5 and 6 (Figure 1). It has long been appreciated by scholars (e.g. Dubuisson 1985; Littleton 1998) that there are indications of light and dark aspects within the functions and within the overarching entities—king figures and goddess figures—of the system, and this series shows these two aspects with the light component presented first in each pair. The problem of how to relate the triad to the larger scheme of the directions is a long-standing

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<sup>1</sup>This was the Traditional Cosmology Society’s conference, 22-23 October 2005, on ‘Where Do We Stand? Dumézil’s Trifunctional Theory Considered and Reconsidered,’ at which an initial form of this paper was given under the title ‘When Arjuna Was King: Studying the Deep Layers in the Indo-European Inheritance.’

one and this schema embodies my solution, with the three functions represented in the first two positions and the last position, and the male and female trifunctional entities represented respectively in the center and in the penultimate position as shown, with stars for kings and circles for females (Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* The functional and trifunctional components in the Edinburgh reference set.

If the system is a primitive classification one, we would expect it to rest on, or to have as one of its frameworks, a kinship system. Historically the Indo-Europeans had kings, and my sense is that the prehistoric system that we can reach back to through the historical evidence also had kings, and that we are concerned not simply with a kinship system but with one that provided for royal succession. Again, Dumézil's formulation is a partial one. He identified a trifunctional king but did not place him in a network of relationships.

The fundamental idea, though, that has enabled work of this sort to go forward was Dumézil's. Greimas has drawn attention to the value of Dumézil's 'point of departure', i.e. that "he affirms a correspondence between the human and

the divine worlds, in which the world of the gods is viewed as a reflection of the mortal world, of man's systems" (Greimas 1992: 1). Before coming to human kinship, I had studied the groupings of gods and concluded that there was a four-generation sequence from a primal goddess, e.g. Ge or Danu, to a culmination in a divine king, e.g. Zeus or Lug, and that the generations of gods corresponded to phases in the imagined development of the universe (Lyle 1990: 109-113; cf. Lyle forthcoming).

Although it would have been possible simply to model human kinship relationships in a theoretical way, it seemed desirable to locate an actual society that operated in a way that was in keeping with the indications from Indo-European mythology. After searching the literature, I concluded that the following features of the matrilineal kinship system of the Asante of West Africa were particularly illuminating and I was able to draw attention to them at a conference in 1997<sup>2</sup> although this is the first time I have presented them in print.

1) *Shallow lineage with apical ancestress*. Although the Asante royal line has an extended lineage, the whole lineage concept in the society is patterned on the lineage segment of shallow depth discussed by Meyer Fortes who says (1950: 258): "This segment, sometimes described as the children of one womb (*yafunu*), generally consists of the uterine descendants of an ancestress not more than four, or occasionally five, generations antecedent to its living adult members." Elsewhere he says:

[F]our generations is about the maximum extension of a descent line over which all the progeny of a man or a woman can remain united either under his or her authority (as sometimes happens in a matrilineal household) or through living contact with him or her. More usually four adult generations (the equivalent of five generations inclusive of children) embrace people of common descent strongly united by kinship sentiment focused on a progenitor or progenetrix who was the

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<sup>2</sup>This conference, which was on 'A Line of Queens and Alternate Succession: New Developments,' was held at the University of Edinburgh under the auspices of the Traditional Cosmology Society on 25 October 1997. Margalit Finkelberg also gave a paper on the Hittites at this conference (see now Finkelberg 2005: 71-79) and I would like to express my gratitude for the stimulus she provided to my research on this occasion and afterwards.

parent or grand-parent of its oldest members. (Fortes 1950: 277)

This lineage segment, consisting of five or six generations including the current adult generation and the founder, seemed a possible equivalent to the four-generation theogonic series. On further exploration, it turned out that there is a good deal of evidence both within the Indo-European area and worldwide for the importance of the shallow lineage,<sup>3</sup> so that the real-life human existence of a four-generation lineage, as in the theogonic model, would not be unexpected. The matrilineal Asante case shows how the primal goddess of the model can be seen as equivalent to a woman who is the apical ancestress of the shallow lineage.

2) *Eligibility to be king through membership in a particular matrilineage.* As regards succession to the Asante kingship, no man could be a claimant without belonging to the correct matrilineage. This gave a new focus to my way of looking at succession. I had been focussed previously on the line of queens into which a man married (Lyle 1992; cf. Lyle 1998). Now, I was drawn to look at the source of the supply of eligible men and to consider the overall posited situation. Only men belonging to a particular matrilineage were eligible as candidates for the kingship, and one man from the set of those eligible became king by marrying a woman in another matrilineage who was descended from the line of queens. Considered historically, it can be seen that it is quite likely that one or other half of this double requirement might survive without the other so that we might expect to find instances where a king was drawn from a specific lineage without being required to marry into another specific line or, alternatively, where a man became king by being selected for marriage into the line of queens without belonging to a designated lineage.

3) *The role of cross-cousin marriage in a dynasty.* A tight form of kinship structure that would allow both halves of the double requirement to be met within the same family is cross-cousin marriage, and this was common among the Asante. Dynastic succession is always complex where there is an element of

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<sup>3</sup>Some instances where the concept of the shallow lineage is valuable are discussed in Charles-Edwards 1993: 50-53, Foxhall 1995: 134-135, Huld 1997, Mitchell 1956: 119, 131-134, and Peletz 1988.

choice and, for full understanding, the Asante case would have to be studied in a broad historical and symbolic context, but it can be noted here that T. C. McCaskie concludes that a candidate for kingship, as well as being “necessarily royal in terms of matriliney,” was ideally the paternal grandson of a former king and that there was a “social understanding that cross-cousin marriage offered the most propitious opportunity” for supplying a candidate qualified in this way (McCaskie 1995: 173). For the alternate succession to kingship that this would involve, see Lyle 1990: 119-131; the alternate kings are referred to here by the colour terms white and red.

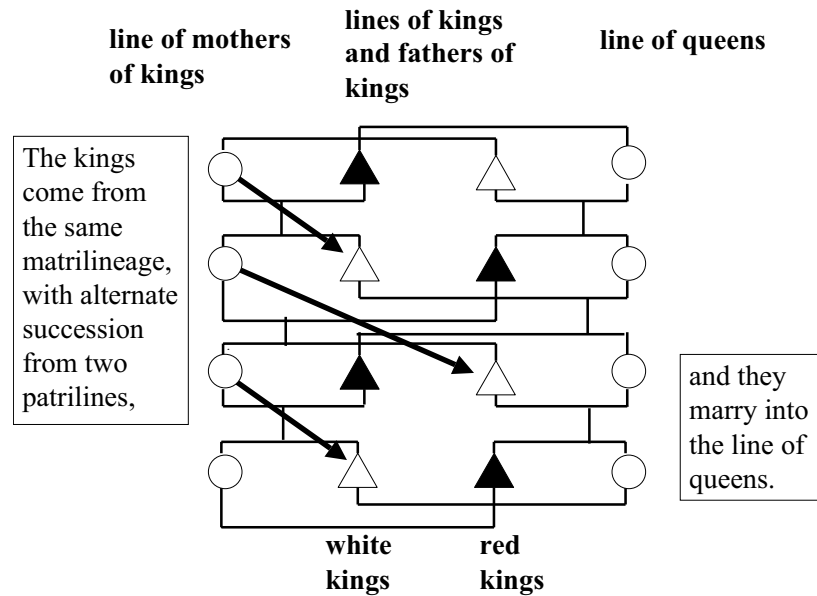


Figure 3. Bilateral cross-cousin marriage over four generations showing the proposed succession to kingship. The triangles indicate males and the circles females. Lines above indicate sibling relationships and lines below indicate marriage relationships.

My suggestion is that the four-generation block illustrated in Figure 3 provided the context for the king and was reflected in the theogony, which still retained traces of it after human society became differently structured. My work on the prehistoric model received an unexpected boost when I became aware of *Access to Origins* published by Mary W. Helms in 1998 which shows how rulers draw legitimacy from their

connection with a creative source in one or both of two ways (Helms 1998: 7, 37-9), for, as I see it, the prehistoric society posited here strengthened the position of the king by making use of both of the possibilities that Helms discusses. Her book gives a broad context for understanding the value of this strategy.

Helms calls one way of access to source 'emergent-house origins.' In this, the starting-point is the king and his ancestry is extended backwards so that he seems the culmination of a temporal sequence. The other way, which she finds had an earlier existence in human societies before the development of the temporal concept, is 'first-principle origins' located in the affines (relatives by marriage) of the king, who are often thought of as distant but, in the case of cross-cousin marriage, are integrated in the same system.

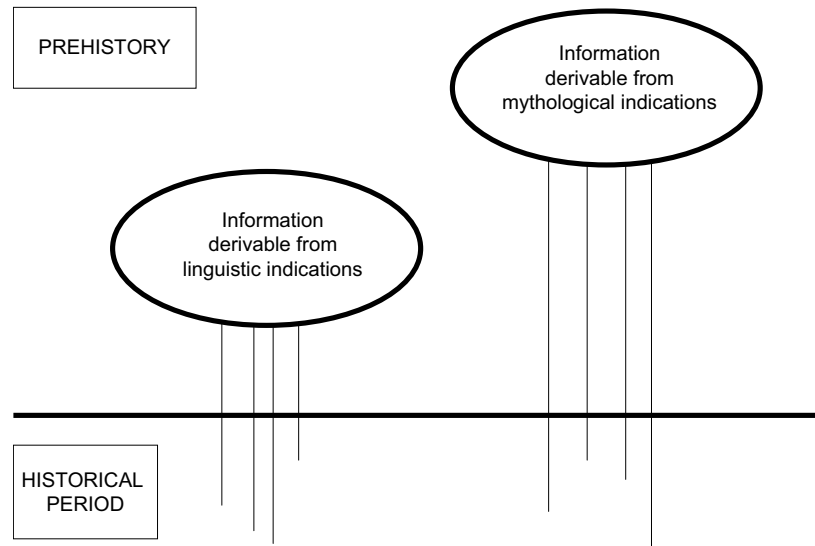
The means used in the posited society to secure double legitimacy for the king can be outlined in this way. There is a need to project diachronically backwards from the king to a beginning and the four-generation model represents this source as embodied in the king's great-grandmother, the ancestress. There is also a need to move sideways from the king on the same generational level, in a way that may involve geographical distance, to reach through marriage an origin-point that is seen as fresh and possibly autochthonous and this source is embodied in the queen.

Although the succession is matrilineal and gives a certain weight to the female, the rule of succession mainly serves to keep the balance between the men in two patrines. The importance of the patrines is evident (cf. the discussion of the lineages of Ancient Greece in Finkelberg 2005: 80). It is easy to see that, once temporal awareness became extended, the role of the apical ancestress only three generations before the current generation could have ceased to have significance and the royal lineages could readily have become patrilineal. An increased historical sense would also have been liable to bring about the loss of the close contact with the cosmos that had been inherent in the direct parallel between gods and humans in a four-generation structure.

I think that it is possible to create a well-grounded kinship-and-succession model that is tied in with the cosmology but that the model leaves open the question of what the kinship pattern was for those members of society who



were not royal. The Asante society as a whole is matrilineal and that could have been the case in this instance, but it is conceivable that the royal families were structured differently from the rest of society and that patrilineality was the norm and matrilineality found only in the royal lines. Studies based on the Indo-European languages have brought out the patrilinear element and, as undertaken at present, would not relate to the model proposed here. However, one recent discussion (Kullanda 2002) does point out the limitations of the standard approach to Indo-European kinship terms and calls for a re-assessment of the linguistic evidence and so perhaps a more informed and subtle approach may be developed that would leave room for an alternative possibility .



*Figure 4.* Extrapolating backwards from indications in the historical period into prehistory, with the linguistic indications penetrating less deeply into the past than the mythological indications.

If the results from the study of language and those from the study of mythology differ, it is not necessary to conclude that those arising from the study of mythology should be discarded. It is possible to suggest that the information derived from mythological indications has a greater time-depth than the information derived from linguistic indications, as shown in Figure 4. Once there is a fuller understanding of underlying cosmological structure, it may be that semantics can be revised

in the light of them and that language too will be able to probe into the deeper past. We may eventually be able to explore diachronic developments even in prehistory and to sketch in adjustments and re-interpretations that took place over an extended period to bring things to the state they are in when they enter the historical record. An essential place in any such activity in the future will be reserved for that initial key concept used by Dumézil—that the organisation of the gods reflected human organisation.

If the foundation for the concept of the gods was laid down in the remote past, as must I think be generally recognised, and if we can now begin to access the mechanisms that brought the divine into the particular shape it took in the Indo-European context, we will be able to enter into a range of knowledge that is bound to have an effect on the broad understanding of religion in the historical period, although the particular formulations of worship and of expressions in narrative and ritual will always need to be interpreted in the cultural context of the immediate environment in space and time. Besides advancing the study of religion and society, the new dimension suggested here may also be able to offer additional pointers to connections with the archaeological record and with the practices that have continued to be tied to the ritual year up to the present day.

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