Self Consciousness
An Alternative Anthropology of Identity

Anthony Cohen
What is the relationship of the individual to society? What is the individual besides being a participant in social relations? Like other social sciences, anthropology has tended to neglect these questions, treating individuals simply as micro-versions of larger social entities, and imputing to them consciousnesses modelled on those of the groups to which they belong.

In this book, Anthony Cohen establishes the importance of the individual, arguing that, in order to appreciate the complexity of social formations, we must take account of self consciousness—individuals’ awareness of themselves and their authorship of their social contexts and conditions. Drawing comparatively on a wide range of ethnographic studies and anthropological topics from around the world, he proposes that anthropological concepts such as ‘culture’, ‘society’ and ‘social relations’ should be approached from the self upwards. He shows how social and cultural forms and processes such as ritual, symbolism, organisation, rhetoric, socialisation, marriage, naming, ethnicity and cultural nationalism are shaped and interpreted by the creative self. In the course of the argument, Professor Cohen dismisses the contention that selfhood is a predominantly Western idea, and shows that attention to the particular, the individual and to self consciousness both informs and disciplines the larger picture.

Self Consciousness reflects the author’s deep concern with social identity and the dialectical relationship of individual and society. It will be of great interest not only to anthropologists but to students and teachers of the other social sciences, including sociology, social psychology and cultural studies.

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Self Consciousness

An alternative anthropology of identity

Anthony P. Cohen

London and New York
This book is dedicated with love to

L.N.C.
I.P.C.
and M.A.C.

from whom I have learned the importance of trying to understand self consciousness—theirs, mine and other people’s.
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Preface and acknowledgements

I do not know, cannot remember, for how long I have been conscious of the matters taken up in this book, but I realise that some must have been with me throughout my self conscious experience. Therefore, I cannot date the origins of the book, and could not begin to acknowledge the influences, academic and other, which have contributed to it. I take instead an arbitrary moment in the early 1980s when, thinking about the ways in which individuals interpret symbols, I was led to hold deep reservations about how anthropologists tended to generalise the meanings of symbols to whole societies or to substantial groups within them. I realised then that, as an anthropologist who pursued an explicit interest in culture and culture theory, I was nevertheless dealing ethnographically with individuals, whose engagement with each other was problematic and fraught with misunderstanding, and who were reserved about their own generalisation into ‘societies’ or ‘communities’ or ‘cultures’ in ways to which anthropologists seemed insensitive.

As I write this, I remind myself that my first anthropological monograph, on local-level politics in Newfoundland, was essentially about seven individuals, and I squirm with some discomfort about how I made them stand for very large-scale social and cultural tendencies (Cohen 1985). It was in working through my long-term fieldwork in Whalsay, Shetland, that I became more aware of the inadequacy with which anthropology conventionally dealt with the complexities of individuals, and generalised them into collectivities. Just as one would expect, the better I came to know my friends and informants there, the more complex they seemed, and the more difficult appeared the task of committing them to paper. How well could any of us describe ourselves on paper within the disciplines of publishing and academic conventions? The problems delayed by some years my book on Whalsay (Cohen 1987) which, as I was even then uneasily aware, hardly avoided the
ethnographic practices about which I was expressing grave doubt, in common with many of my academic generation.

It was finally my preoccupation with the diverse personal stances which the anthropologist adopts in the conduct and writing of ethnographic research which persuaded me of the need for anthropology to explore other people’s self consciousness.¹ I was hardly early into the field. A catalogue of books published in the social and literary sciences over the last ten years and containing the word ‘self in their titles would be a very weighty tome indeed. Perhaps both for that reason, and because the problems I raise have long seemed so intractable to anthropologists, I sensed not a little despair among my friends and colleagues with my preoccupation, perhaps a sense of its futility. I have persisted in order to stress an aspect of this matter which I think has been inadequately recognised. Examining and reflecting on the self is not an alternative to addressing ‘society’ or social relations: they are mututally implicated. But I insist that we cannot properly do the latter, which I accept as the proper focus of anthropological enquiry, without the former. Anthropology will not fulfil its potential to offer sensitive accounts of social processes and formations unless it becomes self conscious—and, when it does so, will lead the way among the humane sciences.

Rather than just indulging me, my friendly interlocutors have helped me by their benevolent and expert criticism, both with their comments on earlier papers, or by taking the trouble to comment in detail on parts of the present book. I am especially indebted to Jim Fernandez, Ladislav Holy, Robert Paine, Nigel Rapport and Marilyn Strathern. Warmest thanks also to Malcolm Anderson, Frank Bechhofer, Jean Briggs, Roy Dilley, Katsuyoshi Fukui, Kirsten Hastrup, Paul Heelas, Wendy James, Carmelo Lisón-Tolosana, Martine Segalen, Cris Shore, Sandra Wallman and Barrie Wilson. The arguments contained in this book have been rehearsed on successive cohorts of Senior Honours students at Edinburgh University, for whose forbearance I am indebted. I have also had the good fortune and privilege of working at Edinburgh with a group of postgraduate students who have helped me far more than they probably realise: Sandra Brown, Rupert Cox, John Harries, Jon Mitchell, Gillian Munro, Amy Porter and Sarah Skerratt.

There is only so much that critics can accomplish in improving a colleague’s work. In the end, I have to accept responsibility for everything that follows.

Returning to my opening remarks, I have drawn here on a series of working papers written since 1986, most of which have been published
in journals or edited symposia. These are cited at the appropriate points
in the text, but I would like to thank the editors and publishers concerned
for allowing me to restate previously published work, specifically: Martine
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Chapter 1

The neglected self
Anthropological traditions

Most Indians do not reveal themselves because it does not occur to them that they have unique selves to reveal.

(Gearing 1970:146)

The self has no private space... but no need for privacy.

(Greenhouse 1986:98)

POSITIONS

Fred Gearing’s sympathetic study depicts the Fox Indians of Iowa as defined by the statuses they occupy in their classificatory kinship system. They regard their behaviour as inhering in the structural niches in which they are placed, so that any other Fox who happened to be similarly located would behave in the same way. Carol Greenhouse imputes a comparable self consciousness—or lack of it—to the devout Southern Baptists she studied in Hopewell, Atlanta, believers who define themselves by their family roles, and who oppose individualism to Christianity (see Chapter 6).

This selflessness seems so at odds with the ways in which most of us might be assumed to think of ourselves that we have to work hard to understand what Gearing and Greenhouse may mean and to envisage the people they thereby describe. Anthropologists have laboured to elicit notions equivalent to our ‘self’ and ‘selfhood’ which are held by the people among whom they have lived and who they have studied. The difficulties of imagining and interpreting these notions are compounded by those of translation, which makes discourse about the self tricky among the speakers of different European languages, let alone those of more esoteric tongues. All sorts of metaphors and circumlocutions have been called in aid, such as ‘indigenous psychologies’ and ‘inner’ (as
opposed to ‘outer’) consciousness, all of which attempt to evoke a distinction between the private and public aspects of a person.

The public-private dimension is a clumsy construction. Writers such as Lienhardt (1985) and Hsu (1985) have shown (for, respectively, Dinka and Chinese) that selfhood is a composite, the constituents of which vary in public and private modes. Thus, the self is not ‘replaced’ by something else as its bearer moves from privacy into public social space; rather, it adopts or discards elements which are not pertinent in more private contexts (for example, in intimate interaction or in solitary contemplation). The self is not a monolith; it is plastic, variable and complex. But that is to say that its description should acknowledge its complexity, a requirement in which anthropologists have not distinguished themselves. We shall consider some reasons for their failings.

Historically, another feature of this concern in anthropology has been the attempt to distinguish among such categories as ‘individual’, ‘person’ and ‘self. These distinctions are arbitrary, and are often difficult to sustain. They will be discussed at length. The motivation to make them clearly stemmed from theoretical influences at the turn of the century which demarcated the social and the psychological; and which elaborated the lineaments of social structure both to provide an analytic scheme and to demonstrate the primacy of society in the formation and determination of behaviour. For example, Durkheim was interested only in those aspects of the individual which could be socialised; he consigned the rest to psychology or physiology. And if these potentially social elements were not adequately socialised, this spoke, in his view, of the pathology of either the individual or society. In a normally functioning society, a person could not reasonably decide to behave in a way which defied social convention. In this theoretical perspective, selfhood was socially determined. The dominance of this perspective in British social anthropology is evident in that until quite recently ‘the self and ‘selfhood’ were simply not recognised as anthropological problems, other than in a methodological sense, despite the publication in 1938 of Mauss’s classic essay on the self, a work only given appropriate recognition nearly fifty years later (see Carrithers et al. 1985).

There was a tradition in American anthropology of concern with the self, due in large part to the influence of the social psychologist G.H. Mead, a scholar whose work has remained almost entirely absent from the undergraduate syllabuses of British social anthropology. But in North American anthropology, concern with the self settled on a rather obscure subfield of the discipline as a whole, ‘psychological anthropology’—again, a specialism which has never been recognised
in Britain—associated with writers such as A.I. Hallowell and Dorothy Lee. It did not attract mainstream attention until very much later, when, with the ‘interpretive turn’ (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979), anthropologists everywhere began to be interested in processes of symbolisation, rather than just in the decoding of cultural symbols.

Selfhood finally moved to centre stage in the late 1970s and 1980s with the linked developments in ‘reflexivity’ and the critical scrutiny of anthropological and ethnographic writing, a movement which is often trivialised by its description as ‘post-modernism’. It was a trend of thought pertinent to selfhood because it interjected explicitly into the ethnographic scenario the figure hitherto proscribed by the canons of disciplinary practice, the anthropologist’s self, appropriately caricatured by Crapanzano (1992) as a ‘trickster’ and by Hastrup (1992a) as a ‘magician’; and, in so doing, triggered a critical examination of the distinction made by ethnographic style and convention between the self (the anthropologist) and the other (the anthropologised).

The convergence of these themes, selfhood and the posture of the anthropologist, was not adventitious. As scholars began to focus on self-awareness and cognate phenomena such as thought, emotion and cognition, the characteristic anthropological problem inevitably arose to pose unanswerable questions: How do you know what the other person is thinking? How do you know that the other person is thinking? How can you discriminate between the other person’s consciousness and your construction of his or her consciousness? The answer to the first and second questions, ‘I cannot know for certain’, leads inexorably to the answer to the third: ‘I cannot’. What we can do, what anthropologists customarily have done, as recent work has shown us, is to use literary devices of one kind or another to convey in our authored texts the impression of such a discrimination. But it is one which we as authors have engineered.

The enormity of this admission should not be underestimated, for it calls into question the methodological pretensions of modern anthropology. It amounts to the admission that the inevitable starting point for my interpretation of another’s selfhood is my own self. For at least the three decades since the philosopher Peter Winch pointed to this inevitability in his The Idea of a Social Science (1958), anthropologists have sought ever more sophisticated means of minimising, if not escaping, its limitations, and they have become very sophisticated indeed. The rigour of anthropological scholarship in validating its rendering of other cultures’ systems of knowledge, belief, thought and communication has arguably been unmatched by the other humane sciences. But it was all
The neglected self
predicated on the prescription to maintain the axiomatic difference between the anthropological self and the anthropologised other.

The argument of this book denies the authority of that axiom. It is plainly unacceptable to assume that anthropologist and anthropologised are alike; indeed, it could be perverse, for it might risk rendering anthropology redundant. But, equally, the assumption that they are not alike is unacceptable for it seems to lead inexorably to the construction of their difference. It is also perverse, for it denies the pertinence of the most potent investigative and interpretive weapons in the anthropologist’s armoury: his or her own experience and consciousness.

OBJECTIVES

This argument cannot be made simply or briefly, but depends on extended demonstration. That is one of the purposes of this book. It is implicated in, but subsidiary to, its principal objective which is to show why we must address the question of the self since not to do so is to risk misunderstanding, and therefore misrepresenting, the people who we claim to know and who we represent to others.

It is always difficult to know quite when a book originated. I began to write the final version of this volume during the summer of 1992, but had been consciously and deliberately working on it during at least the previous six years. During this period as working papers and articles appeared, some of my friends and colleagues grew increasingly exasperated with the apparent futility of my argument which called for anthropologists to do what we all know cannot be done: to elicit and describe the thoughts and sentiments of individuals which we otherwise gloss over in the generalisations we derive from collective social categories. Some were more than sceptical about my suggestion that we should use in a rigorous and controlled fashion the only means which is available to us: our experience of our own selves. Still others insisted that this objective was simply not the proper business of anthropology. I hope to show in this book that, notwithstanding these entirely respectable objections, anthropologists inevitably engage with the self, their own and other people’s, and that it is in the nature of their enquiry that they must do so. Because they are unaware of doing it, or are squeamish about it, it is often fudged. But, by drawing extensively on the work of anthropologists and on a wide spectrum of cultural experience and ethnographic expertise, I will try to demonstrate that social anthropology has incorporated self-consciousness implicitly into its discourse, and should now come out of the closet in order to deal more faithfully and fully with the self.
There is nothing new in the argument that methodologically anthropologists cannot avoid the intrusion of their own selves. It has been rehearsed openly and repeatedly throughout the history of modern social anthropology, sociology and the philosophy of science. Further, the engagement with critical literary theory and with various ‘post-modern’ currents has extended this self-scrutiny from the investigative to the writing processes in ethnographic work. More recently, the argument has been further developed by systematic attempts to explore how what had previously been regarded as a methodological burden and inhibition might be transformed instead into a resource, even a virtue (see e.g. Okely and Callaway 1992).

This aspiration is the premise for the present study. The proposition is that anthropologists’ self-consciousness may stimulate their sensitivity to the self consciousness of those they study. I am not advocating an egocentric anthropology, or anything so facile as the notion that ‘we are all the same under the skin’, and that we might therefore be justified in treating ourselves as models for others. But I do insist that if there is no justification for treating people axiomatically as being alike, then equally the assumption of their difference is also questionable. Modern social anthropology was built on the putative cultural distance between anthropologist and anthropologised, on the largely unexamined assumption of the differences between the self (observer) and the other (observed). Throughout the 1980s, anthropologists showed how this presumption had been made self-validating in anthropological analysis and writing. I shall argue later that one of its unfortunate consequences has been to deny to cultural ‘others’ the self consciousness which we so value in ourselves.

If my contention is correct, then our neglect of others’ selves must be objectionable for all kinds of reasons and certainly raises serious ethical questions. But the implication on which I wish to focus is that it has probably rendered our accounts of other societies inaccurate in important respects, since they must be revealed as generalisations from the only partially perceived, at worst misperceived, elements of those societies—individuals to whom we have denied self consciousness.

Addressing self consciousness and selfhood thus brings us up critically and inevitably against two bulwarks of ethnographic practice: generalisation and cultural relativism. Indeed, acknowledging that other people have selves also means recognising that generalising them into such analytic collectivities as tribes, castes and ethnic groups may be a very crude means of categorisation, the inadequacies of which we have all experienced in similar categorisations of ourselves. Sensitive
ethnography demands nothing less than attention to other people's selves, an inquiry which inevitably entails to some extent the use of our own consciousness as a paradigm.

However, I repeat that my concern is not with the self for its own sake, but is to consider critically and constructively the assumptions we conventionally make about the relationship of individual to society. Western social science proceeds from the top downwards, from society to the individual, deriving individuals from the social structures to which they belong: class, nationality, state, ethnic group, tribe, kinship group, gender, religion, caste, generation, and so on. We have concentrated on these collective structures and categories and by and large have taken the individual for granted. We have thereby created fictions. My argument is that we should now set out to qualify these, if not from the bottom upwards, then by recognising that the relationship of individual and society is far more complex and infinitely more variable than can be encompassed by a simple, uni-dimensional deductive model.

This book is written with reference to, and from the perspective of, social anthropology, partly because it is my own discipline and because I am therefore criticising my own practice. However, readers may note that at various points in the text I identify the subject more generally with social science. This is not careless writing or absent-mindedness. While anthropological experience reveals the practices which I identify in the argument, they are also present in other social science disciplines which may have been even less sensitive to them. I have also long taken the view that, both because of its theoretical focus on culture, and notwithstanding my critical stance, its general methodological rigour, social anthropology should be regarded as fundamental to social scholarship. My argument is therefore addressed in a non-sectarian spirit to all those academic disciplines whose practitioners regard themselves as engaged in the humane sciences in the hope that it may contribute to the discourse among them.1

WHY SHOULD ANTHROPOLOGISTS BE CONCERNED WITH THE SELF?

Concern with the self has not been universally welcomed among anthropologists; indeed, it has provoked some trenchant comment and invective. There are those who dismiss it as mere 'self-indulgence' (inter alia Friedman 1987; Sangren 1988), a deliberate pun; those who argue that it is a Western-, Euro- or Anglocentric preoccupation; and those who maintain more substantially, if atavistically, that it detracts from our
proper attention to social relations, or that it poses such intractable methodological difficulties that it is really a blind alley. The first comment is too trivial to require an answer, the second a contention which is at odds with the ethnographic record, as the case studies which follow will show. The present book attempts to address the three latter points.

There is no essential opposition between the consideration of the self and the description and analysis of social relations, indeed, quite the contrary. In the past, our concern with groups and categories, that is, with the social bases of social relations, has largely ignored the dimensions of the self and self consciousness, and may therefore be regarded as having dealt with bogus entities. In treating individuals either explicitly or by default as merely socially or culturally driven, ignoring the authorial or ‘self-driven’ aspects of behaviour, is to render them at best partially, and, perhaps more often, as fictitious ciphers of the anthropologist’s theoretical invention. It was an approach with a pedigree at least as long as the sociological concept of role, a term which focuses wholly on what a person does socially to the exclusion of who the person is. To treat social relationships as encounters among roles seems odd, and ethnographers rarely present their descriptions in this modest way. They are much more inclined to pretend that they are dealing with people’, but, as I have suggested, this seems an unjustifiable pretence.

Let us take a step backwards. If we regard social groups as a collection of complex selves (complex, because any individual must be regarded as a cluster of selves or as a multi-dimensional self) we are clearly acknowledging that they are more complicated and require more subtle and sensitive description and explanation than if we treat them simply as a combination of roles. Indeed, the aggregation of these complex entities into groups may itself be seen as more problematic than would otherwise be the case. Collective behaviour is then revealed as something of a triumph, rather than as being merely mechanical. I suspect that this is a description which gibes more closely with our personal experience as members of families, committees, clubs, platoons or whatever.

If these problematic aggregations are then magnified to the level of society, we can put into a quite different focus the question of how society is possible. Far from being sociologically gratuitous, the question is a real one. The conventional answers of European social theory, most of which point to determinism of some kind or other, are inadequate. They do not take account of the individual’s capacity to reflect on his or her own behaviour— that is, to be self-conscious— and to come to any
conclusion other than that there is no real choice about how to behave—the bleak, but unconvincing, views which Gearing and Greenhouse attribute to, respectively, the Fox and the Hopewell Baptists. Nor do they address the meaning which the decision has for the individual, which may be significantly different from its perception by others. For example, if I make a full and accurate statement of my annual income to the Inland Revenue, my behaviour would be interpretable at the macro-level as evidence of the power of the state to compel its subjects to make such disclosures and to penalise them if they are shown to be delinquent. The most this interpretation will allow to my discretion is the decision to be law-abiding. But a moment’s reflection will suggest numerous other possibilities. The fact that these all eventuate in the same behaviour may not be irrelevant so far as the state and its revenues are concerned, but this simplistic view fails utterly to explain my behaviour. It neglects my reasons for my complicity with laws with which I may disagree. This kind of account therefore leaves the cohesion of people into societies unexplained, or, at best, only partially explained.

So if we return to the question, ‘how is society possible?’ or the less grandiose enquiry, ‘how are social groups possible?’ I suggest that, far from taking selfhood for granted, the question cannot be sensibly addressed without putting the self at its very centre. The problem lies in the putative contradiction between selfhood, individuality and socialness. It is perhaps an irony that we have to approach the fundamental problem of social cohesion through its apparent opposite, selfhood and personal identity.

**COMPLEX SELVES**

Perhaps the issue may be put into focus if we contemplate ourselves as anthropologists contemplate the societies which they struggle to understand: that is, if we try to do some fieldwork on ourselves. We have curious mixtures of allegiances. The issue is not that we belong to many different kinds of group and association, although of course we do. Rather, the curiosity lies in their incompatibility. Many are positively antagonistic to each other. For example, I remember as an adolescent finding the presence of my friends embarrassing if I was with my parents. But why? I felt reasonably at ease with my parents when we were just among family, comfortable with my friends when exclusively in their company; but when both sets of associates were together, I felt acute awkwardness. You may experience similar discomfort if you try to mix together different sets of friends. It is not an uncommon experience
that people who get on well both with their consanguines and their affines nevertheless find it very difficult to resolve the apparently competing claims made on them by each set of relatives. We have routinely to juggle the incompatible claims of family and work, of family and friends, of friends and neighbours, of neighbours and coreligionists; of locality and ethnic peers, of ethnic peers and nationality, of nationality and locality, and so on. All of these associations pull us in different directions. It seems to me remarkable that, as individuals, we generally manage to cope with these many incompatible claims on our allegiance without cracking under the strain. It is little short of a triumph that we do so while also preserving a reasonable sense of loyalty to our own sense of self, that is, to our individuality. For it is a very odd characteristic of our kind of society (I write as a bourgeois British intellectual) that we are expected to be able to accommodate these plural claims which are made on us, while also having a strongly developed sense of self. Indeed, when a man or woman fails, or worries that they might fail, we say of them that ‘they are not quite themselves’!

This demand which we are inclined to make of ourselves and others for a strong and stable sense of self makes all the more curious the penchant which British anthropologists have showed during the last thirty years for theories which depict social and personal identity as being highly contingent. These theories owe much to the American sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism, in the development of which Mead’s influence was seminal. Mead was concerned with the ways in which individuals symbolise themselves in social interaction, a concern from which sprang the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism. He distinguished between the ‘me’—the unthinking being, the enduring product of experience—and the ‘I’, the consciousness of being which, through its ability to symbolise, is capable of behavioural control, precisely because it conceptualises the self. The ‘I’, the active agency of being, has to be continuously creative to keep viable the person (including the ‘me’), a view of the self which has been echoed in recent anthropological work (e.g. Heelas 1981a: 13–14; also Lock 1981:32). Much of Mead’s work elaborated this creative aspect of the individual. For example, he dealt with the human’s unique capacity to ‘manipulate’, to intercede, through ‘mind’, between means and ends, to intervene, through language, between perception and ‘consummation’. This mediation takes the form of reflective thought, and is where individuality reposes.

For Mead, the self is nurtured, rather than determined, by interaction with the other, since interaction stimulates reflexivity (e.g. Mead 1934).
Indeed, like Cooley before him, he saw social interaction as being the very foundation of self-conception: both are accomplished by ‘taking the role of the other’, viewing oneself and one’s behaviour from what is imagined to be the perspective of an other, anticipating the other’s reaction. The ‘I’ component of the self is the analyst of this self-observation who modifies or plans behaviour on the basis of this analysis. The conceptual material for the analysis, in the Meadian view, is derived partly from culture, which explains the similarities to be observed among the members of a society. It is also mediated through the individual’s consciousness in ways which reflect cultural theories of the relationship of individual to society.

The symbolic interactionist tradition ran in a continuous line from Mead to Goffman. Goffman’s early writing on personal identity was echoed in turn in Fredrik Barth’s seminal statement on ethnicity which set the style for anthropological studies of ethnic identity for nearly twenty years. Goffman saw personal identity as an intentional construction designed to secure for its bearer the greatest advantage, or the least disadvantage, in his or her dealings with ‘significant others’. Indeed he analyses all behaviour as if it was composed of tactical moves in a strategic game. The titles of his early books and articles make the point: ‘On facework’; The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life; Strategic Interaction, and Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.

Barth, trained both in Britain and the United States, based his transactional model of social behaviour on a similar calculus of advantage (1966). More specifically, in his seminal essay introducing the volume Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (1969), he argued that ethnic identity is malleable. It is articulated at ‘the boundary’ since that is where ethnic groups encounter each other, and the identity of any group is modulated to and moderated by that of the other. That is to say that ethnicity is impermanent, adjusting itself to the specific circumstances of any ethnic interaction.

This kind of argument was made with respect to personal identity by Leach, another important influence on Barth (see Paine 1974). In his famous series of Reith Lectures, A Runaway World?, Leach said: ‘I identify myself with a collective we which is then contrasted with some other…. What we are, or what the other is will depend upon context’ (Leach 1967a: 34). It is not at all clear whether Leach really intended to depict the self as being so ephemeral, so contingent as this. Might he have confused self with persona? It seems unlikely. The wording seems deliberate: ‘I identify myself…’. There is no suggestion in this formulation that I associate