MR854948 (88a:01005) 01A10 (92A20)

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Ethnomathematics.

Hist. of Sci. **24** (1986), *no. 64, part 2,* 125–144.

The article is an appeal to go seriously into “ethnomathematics”, defined as “the study of mathematical ideas of nonliterate people”. In the first part, the current treatment of the subject (mostly reduced to the study of counting, number words and tally systems, eventually broadened into a discussion of “pre-” or “non-logical” modes of thought) is demonstrated through a critical discussion of unrecognized presuppositions and prejudices not to be serious. The second part points out (on the examples of geometrically organized navigation in the Caroline Islands and on abstractly organized marriage- and kinship-classes among the Australian Aranda and the New Hebridean Ambrym) that serious study is indeed required if the subject is to be grasped.

The article emphasizes that the isolation of “mathematics” as a separate conceptual entity is a literate phenomenon (the article says “Western”, but Medieval India and China present us with grossly congruent conceptual delimitations). However, it does not address the question whether the various nonliterate mathematical (or protomathematical) patterns of thought are really sufficiently akin to be treated under a unified heading. The heading “ethnomathematics” presupposes that they are; but if this is so the traditional treatment of ethnomathematics as illustrative of the early history of “our” mathematics is also justified in principle, in spite of the authors’ opposite claim: All literate cultures have developed from nonliterate cultures. (But the traditional way to do the thing remains unjustified ethnocentrism.)

Reviewed by *Jens Høyrup*