


REMEMBERING MARY DOUGLAS

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Every month, the *Flashbacks* blog highlights events, people, and organizations that connect 4S and New Orleans in celebration of our annual meeting returning to New Orleans 25 years after our last NOLA-based meeting. This month, we want to spotlight a scholar: Mary Douglas.

Mary Douglas (March 25, 1921- May 16, 2007) was a prolific anthropologist who is perhaps best known for her work on ritual pollution, *Purity and Danger*. In 1994, Douglas was awarded 4S's the J.D. Bernal Prize for her contribution to the social study of science and technology. Although she was unable to attend the 1994 conference in New Orleans, she did accept the award in writing (published in *Science, Technology and Human Values* in 1995). Her acceptance discussed her honor about being recognized by a group that, at the time, was mostly sociologists. She also discussed the issue of studying scientists and the difficulties it presents in comparison to more traditional anthropological sites in which there may be more buy-in.

Mary Douglas's major contribution to science and technology studies were tied to her car  ng interests in the cultural study of risk, ritual, and pollution. Steven Shapin, who wrote her citation for

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Natural Symbols as the works that contributed most to her achieving the Bernal Prize.

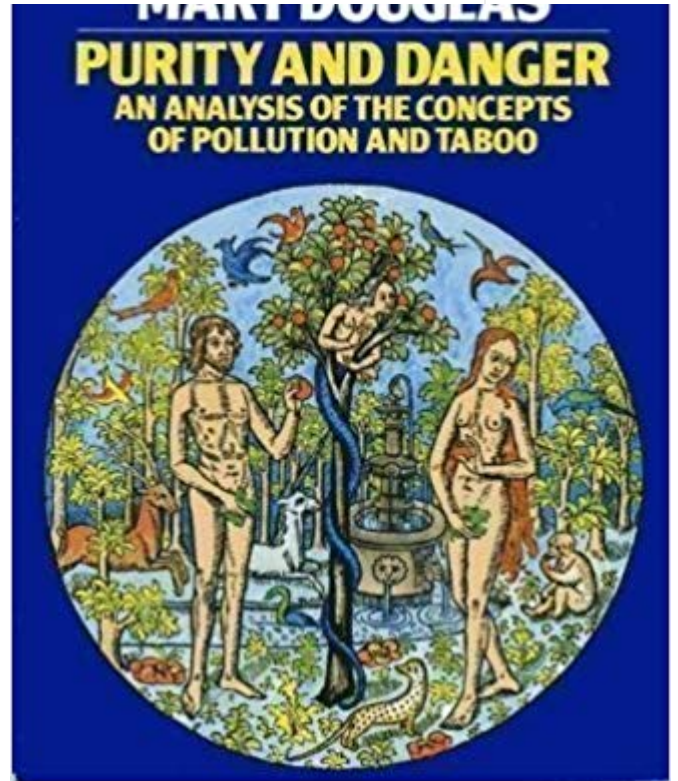
Douglas started out her anthropological career as a student of E.E. Evans-Pritchard

and M.N. Srinivas doing classical anthropological study among the Lele of the Kasai region of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She published numerous writings on the, daily lives, religious rituals, and other customs of the Lele.

Her interests in their rituals eventually led to her groundbreaking work, *Purity and Danger* (1966), in which she gave us the knowledge that dirt is but “matter out of place.” Douglas’s goal in *Purity and Danger* was to unite the concepts of religious and secular defilement and show that conceptions of what constituted dirt, purity, and impurity depended on broader cultural meanings.

Douglas’s next major work was *Natural Symbols* (1970). In *Natural Symbols*, Douglas again took on ritual and society, proposing the idea that the boundedness and structure of a society determined its ritual behavior. More though, she theorized that the action, the rituals, preceded the myths that kept them stable. This book also continued Douglas’s preoccupation with risk, which she continued to work on for years.

In Mary Douglas’s later career, she began to shift her interests more toward religion and institutions. She took up posts in humanities and religious studies departments in the United



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continue to study topics such as environmental risk, waste, hierarchy, and institutions.

