Explorations in
African Systems of Thought
Introduction

by Ivan Karp

The papers in this volume are the result of a speakers seminar organized for the African Studies Program at Indiana University during the fall of 1977. Speakers at that seminar were given the task of illustrating what they considered to be important issues and approaches to the analysis of African systems of thought, using materials from their own research. We were impressed with the quality of research presented by the speakers and struck by an increasing sense that the differences and similarities among the various contributions were distributed in such a way as to give an overview of both the variety and the directions presently characteristic of studies of African systems of thought.

The editors of an earlier volume on the same subject concluded that disparities among the contributors were complementary rather than contradictory (Fortes and Dieterlen, 1965). We share this view. Our organization of materials, however, is more diverse. In this earlier volume the approaches to African systems of thought were perceived as divided into two categories which are characteristic of national styles. The French, they argued, were concerned with the systemic aspects of ideational systems, while the British chose to examine African systems of thought in relation to social structure and action. This difference resulted from the French emphasis on cosmology and the British concern with ritual. That these two national styles directed attention to different aspects of African systems of thought is not difficult to discover. Cosmology embodies the systemic aspects of belief; its description leads to an understanding of world view and the more speculative aspects of the conceptual systems of a culture. Ritual, on the other hand, is a standardized form of conduct. Conduct by its very nature is more affected than is belief by the social and natural environments in which it is found. It can be viewed as expressive of the social order and in some cases as constitutive of or leading to changes in status and role. The French interest in indigenous philosophy, therefore, leads in one direction, and the British interest in social structure and process leads in another.

This distinction in terms of national styles, as Fortes and Dieterlen have admitted, is a simplification. In the years following the confer-
ence from which their book emerged, the scope of interests and the definition of problems characteristic of the scholars who describe African systems of thought has led to a reevaluation of categories based on this national distinction. In addition, researchers now draw upon a variety of disciplines for their clues to analysis rather than remaining within the confines of their initial training. Thus, the division into two types of approaches is made even more unworkable by the diversity that may be exhibited in a single work of scholarship.

Two studies that emanate from one department in a single university may illustrate how diverse the conception of problem and analysis may be. Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion* (1955) and Middleton's *Lugbara Religion* (1960) present diametrically opposed views on where the system is to be found in the analysis of African systems of thought. *Nuer Religion* argues that the religious conceptions of the Nuer are defined in terms of a belief in Spirit and its penetration into the material world. Complexity of belief, Evans-Pritchard asserts, is the result of the association of Nuer religious beliefs with the social order. The bewildering variety of religious representations are "refractions," as he calls them, resulting from the intersection of belief with history, society, and nature. Finally he concludes that Nuer religious action, ritual, can be shown to be logically entailed in the Nuer definition of religious experience.

Evans-Pritchard's student, John Middleton, takes precisely the opposite position in his excellent work, *Lugbara Religion*. He argues that Lugbara religious conceptions have no system at all at the level of belief.

Lugbara have no set of inconsistent beliefs as to the nature of man and their world. Their beliefs are significant in given situations and their consistency lies in the way in which they are used in ritual action (25).

Middleton then shows that the invocation of different mystical entities by the Lugbara (ancestors, witches, and so on) is related to such factors as the type of conflict, structural positions of the actors, the strategy employed by different persons, and the stage of development of local groups. In Middleton's study we are presented with an analysis of the political uses of belief.

What sense is to be made of these differences? Are readers to believe that the Nuer are proto-structuralists while the Lugbara are lumpen pragmatists? This question is not easily answered. Differences in approach, appearing even between a scholar and his student, indicate that the entire problem of description and comparison must be treated carefully. There is no doubt that African systems of thought differ in the degree of systematization as well as in the degree to which this systematization varies for specialist and laity, as Willis has shown (1972).

The differing impressions of the thought systems of the Nuer and the Lugbara presented by Evans-Pritchard and Middleton are a case in point. Middleton's observation about the absence of system at the level of belief must be regarded with suspicion until he provides an analysis of the sort found in Evans-Pritchard's book. Until Middleton brackets the effects of nature, society, and history on Lugbara thought, we will be unable to assess the truth of his observation that "the Lugbara have no set of inconsistent beliefs . . . ." Similarly the degree to which religion acts as a mechanism of social control among the Nuer will not be known until this problem is investigated in their society. In *Nuer Religion*, Evans-Pritchard does not analyze the belief system in these terms, although one may discover hints in the material he presents. 3

The degree to which the system of thought of an African people strikes the observer as consistent or not may derive from the manner in which the thought system is interconnected to the social order. The Lugbara have a system of ancestor worship which, as Fortes pointed out for the Tallensi, is intrinsic to the constitution of the lineage system (1955; 1961); the Nuer do not. It would be useful to compare the belief systems of the two societies in terms of what Nadel called the "competencies" of religion, "the things religions do for individuals or societies . . . ." (1954:259). As Nadel shows in *Nupé Religion*, African societies differ in the degree and manner to which their belief systems are related to aspects of the social order. The question of the relationship of thought to the context in which it is articulated is one that has not often been explored in the study of African systems of thought. The papers in this volume, particularly those by Fernandez, Karp, Burton, and Packard, contribute to this investigation. At the very least, they illustrate how complex the solution must be.

We may see then how difficult it is to account for diversity in approaches to the study of African systems of thought. French rationalism and British empiricism are no doubt a component of the variation,
but there are other aspects of the context of the research which may affect the image of the system as it is represented in the reports of the investigators. These aspects are derived from a number of sources. There are, for example, problems of an epistemological sort. The nature of the problem to be investigated may affect the image of the system because data elicited within different frames of reference are not wholly the same. On the other hand, there are practical matters over which an investigator may have no control. These may include the language competence of researchers as it affects their ability to understand nuances of meaning, or simply the amount of time available for investigation. This second factor is especially important when investigating rites which may occur over a time period of more than a year. The great rituals of the gada age systems of the Oromo-speaking peoples are a case in point. An investigator may never have the opportunity to observe what his informants describe, given the notorious inability of the various Oromo peoples to hold the ceremony within the eight-year period they specify (Baxter and Almagor, 1978). It is well known that informant accounts differ between circumstances when they are asked to recall performances and circumstances in which they are asked to comment on performances observed by both the informant and the researcher. Finally, aspects of the relation of belief to its contexts will affect the representation of the system made by the researcher. I have discussed these above in the contrast I drew between the religious systems of the Nuer and the Lugbara.

In spite of all these problems it appeared to the editors that the contributors to this volume tackled a limited number of issues, although a number of papers dealt with more than one of the issues and could have been included in more than one section. Taken together the essays in this volume stress problems of analysis over questions of content. We believe that the reason for this methodological orientation is that the study of African systems of thought has passed through a phase in which undue emphasis was placed on the content description of various aspects of systems in order to make them (the systems) more comparable to each other. Too many studies are of the "witchcraft and sorcery or spirit possession among the so-and-so" type rather than of the theory and interpretations of misfortune and its relationship to other patterns of belief and experience among the so-and-so. Actually, many of the best studies, such as Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937) and Fortes' studies of ancestor worship among the Talensi (1959; 1961), do just what we have suggested, but they have been misunderstood.

We believe that the most important task before us is to provide models for the analysis of thought in relation to experience and not to describe pieces of systems. The essays in this volume have this as their goal. Vaughan's essay illustrates this point. His is not a description of a system of divine kingship found among the Margi of Nigeria. Instead he argues that ritual and political aspects of Margi kingship can only be understood when related to such existential dilemmas as aging and succession. Among the Margi, divine kingship is an attempt to solve real problems that can only be understood within the context of the community's thought system and not in terms of the isolation of a partial system, such as divine kingship in this case, spirit possession or ancestor worship in other cases.

The organization of this volume follows from our conviction that models for the analysis of the existential aspects of African systems of thought currently present the most interesting problems to investigators. The first section, "Modes of Thought," illustrates this approach in two ways. First, it addresses the hoary problem of how to interpret expressions of thought from members of other societies. This problem raises fundamental issues concerning modes of thought in translation. The study of thought systems in other cultures has passed beyond typologizing differences, as MacCaffrey reminds us in his essay which concludes the volume. Instead, scholars are now concerned with describing the organizing metaphors in terms of the systems of thought and ritual practice that are articulated. De Heusch's paper provides an example of this description by using the structuralist approach he has pioneered for Africa, the most notable example being *Le Roi Ivere* (1972). In his paper for this volume de Heusch's analysis differs from Lévi-Strauss' structuralism in that he does not limit himself to analyzing myth, but attempts as well to treat ritual as a system of implicit mythology. In so doing he provides a bridge between an emphasis on the idealional found in the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and a concern with situational aspects of meaning found in Victor Turner's pioneering studies of symbolism (1967; 1968).

The paper by James Fernandez illustrates another facet of the problem of interpreting modes of thought. He asks to what degree both the context and the rules of performance affect the image of systems scholars abstract from their informants' accounts and actions. In
studies of the differences in mentality between literate and nonliterate cultures, Fernandez suggests that the differences perceived are not so much results of different structures on either side of the "great divide," as they are results of learning different rules of relevance in the context of performance. Thus while de Heusch analyzes the metaphors that organize ritual performance and symbolic expression in diverse contexts, Fernandez seeks to discover the effect of the definition of the situation on the expression of thought. Not only do the two authors complement each other, they show the importance of taking into account both structure and performance before drawing conclusions about the nature of modes of thought.

The two essays by Bird and Kendall and Ray illustrate the second dimension of analysis of thought that is highlighted in the section "modes of thought." In both essays, the authors utilize diverse types of materials that are not part of the standard body of data collected by social anthropologists. Bird and Kendall's elegant analysis of the theory of social action implicit in the Sunjata epic shows that the epic cannot be understood without knowledge of the cultural background, particularly the indigenous "theory of the person." They also show, however, that the theory of the person is dramatized for the Mandé in their oral art. Thus an analysis that neglects the forms in which the system of thought is presented to the people risks misinterpreting the nature of the thought involved, a point made strongly in the Fernandez essay as well. Finally, Ray obliterates conventional anthropological categories in his analysis of the theme of the origin of death. He shows that what anthropologists call "kinship" has to be understood among the Baganda in terms of their implicit ontology and reverses his analysis to illustrate the fact that ontological notions can only be understood in the context of prevalent forms of social relations in a society. Perhaps it is not an accident that Bird and Kendall are linguists and Ray is trained in philosophy and the history of religions. They bring to their analyses sensitivities that are often ignored in the sorts of questions anthropologists are trained to ask.

The second section, "Images of Social Experience," is devoted to what might be called indigenous social theory and moral philosophy. The thrust of the papers here is away from the idealational and towards the experiential. These papers are concerned with what Godfrey Lienhardt has called the "imaging of experience" (1969), the uses to which actors put collective representations in order to make sense out of their experience of the social and natural worlds. Karp focuses upon indeterminacy in social interaction and relates that to the experience of self, other, and social order. He argues that social forms or events are used by the Iteso in an attempt to achieve desired states of social experience and to express difficulties in arriving at their socially constituted goals. Thus, the Iteso beer party is a vehicle for the expression of social and moral ideas as well as the indigenous explanation of why those ideals prove so difficult to capture in social practice. For the Iteso, the beer party encapsulates both prescriptive and explanatory dimensions of their image of self and society.

Vaughan and Beidelman turn to the intersection of social and natural worlds. Both are concerned with the construction of aging in society. Beidelman seeks to discover constraints placed upon the cultural construction of age in the biological differences among the sexes. He argues that differences in the experience of sexuality and role of reproduction limit the means by which aging in women may be interpreted to a far greater degree than those for men in subsistence-based societies. Vaughan sees divine kingship as an image of aging and succession writ large, among other things, and argues that its hold upon the Margi is based in their own experience. In the process of presenting his argument, he provides a means of viewing divine kingship from the "inside," as it were, by interpreting it in terms of universal processes. Finally, Arens returns to the old standby topics of witchcraft and sorcery to remind us that whatever the cultural definition of misfortune, ongoing social experience will affect the immediate interpretations made by the members of a community as well as the image of the system seen by the analyst.

Section three addresses the difficult problem of "Dynamics." Intellectual history in societies without written records poses problems that do not admit of easy solutions. Kopytoff's provocative paper contends with the functionalist dogma that systems of thought have to be formulated vaguely so as to be able to fit with the social order. Implicit in this conception of culture and society is the notion that systems of thought change in response to social change. In contrast Kopytoff argues that belief systems may have associated with them an internal dynamic. His analysis of revitalization cults indicates that they rise and fall because they don't work. Furthermore, they do not work because the Sukú view their social world as entropic. They need new cults in order to revive a failing social and natural world.
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Entropy also seems to be at work in the social theory of Ethiopian societies described by Bauer and Himnant. This may constitute a basic theme in African systems of thought, and further research into revitalization movements may bear upon this insight. In any case, the papers in this section show that scholars in their accounts have not stressed sufficiently the dynamism of African systems of thought. This dynamism may be of a number of varieties. Kopytoff shows that changes may result from the conception of nature. In a splendid piece of historical research, Packard takes the position that because African systems of thought provide frameworks for the interpretation of experience, changing social conditions feed back upon the ideas in terms of which they are interpreted in the first instance. This may result in radical conceptual change or "conversion" as Packard calls it. Bauer and Himnant show that the function of a conceptual system such as divination is related to conditions of social change. Their comparison of divination in Tigre and Guji societies provides a controlled comparison of the manner in which belief is affected by social change of the sort that is seldom found in analyses of conceptual systems. Finally, Burton shifts our concern with change over time to change over space. His analysis of the social dynamics of Atuot religion suggests that the image of the systems may be affected by the conditions and the places in which the research is done.

In the final section on "Comparisons," MacGaffey undertakes a pioneering analysis of whole systems of thought by focusing on the entire complex of roles in terms of which the system is organized. Thus he shows that such types as "witch" and "diviner" cannot be analyzed except in relation to each other and that comparison among systems may only be made in terms of sets of relationships and not in terms of isolated roles. MacGaffey's comparison on the basis of social roles is not the only sort of comparison that may be done, but the principle of comparing patterns of relationships and not isolated roles or ideas is a valid one, if extremely difficult to achieve. It may explain why comparative studies have so rarely been successful in the analysis of African systems of thought.

Benjamin Ray's recent book African Religions may provide a starting point for further comparisons. He elaborates a framework for description based on the elements of myth, symbol, and community. As noted, MacGaffey's comparison focuses upon the role sets found in the community dimension. As Ray has suggested in a comment on

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MacGaffey's paper, cosmological and ontological aspects of African systems of thought such as Ray describes in his own contribution may not be encompassed in the sociological dimension to which MacGaffey directs his attention.

The difficulties that beset comparative analysis are similar to those earlier described for the description of single systems. The analysis will depend upon the problem undertaken by the researcher and the conditions of the research, all compounded, of course, by the multiple origins of the data. Problems do not come unbidden to the mind of the researcher, however, nor are they derived solely from theory. The researcher has an obligation to describe the contours of experience as organized by the subjects of his research. The images in terms of which members of a society experience their world, the symbols through which they express that experience, and the forms of their expression are situated at the core of the analysis of African systems of thought. It is towards the description of such phenomena that this volume is dedicated.

NOTES

1. Additional papers were solicited from W. Arens, Dan F. Bauer and John Himnant, Benjamin Ray, John Burton, and Wyatt MacGaffey. We are grateful for the support given by the staff and students of the African Studies Program at Indiana University.

2. In his description of the Nuer concept of thok, "respect," and its relationship to ideas of sin, Evans-Pritchard notes the following:

   The purpose and function of these respect relationships are evident. They are intended to keep people apart from other people or from creatures or things. . . . Some of them have important secondary functions in the regulation of the social order—for example, those which determine behavior between affines and between parties to feuds; but we need not inquire why they concern some persons, things and situations and not others, nor what these persons, things and situations have in common. We are concerned only with the fact that a violation of the prohibition is to a greater or lesser degree a fault which in many cases brings disaster to the transgresser (1956: 180–81).

Thus, he concludes that the intersection of ideas about thok with certain aspects about the social order will not provide a better understanding of the problem to which he has set himself; viz. what is the cultural logic of Nuer religious beliefs.
3. Certain types of context are involved in particular studies. Thus Fortes' exemplary work *Oedipus and Job in West African Religions*, for example, examines ancestor worship among the Tallensi "in the context of the situation, the context of personal history, and the context of social relations..." The interrelationships among belief, symbol, and context have rarely been explored in detail.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY


## SECTION I

### Modes of Thought