Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Oedipus and Job in West African Religions by Meyer Fortes; Robin Horton
Ivan Karp


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in late colonial times, or detailed studies by students and visitors of work in progress.

The brief section on the concept of ethnicity in Africa appears as a step in a general critique of anthropology from the point of view of economic history, in which S. Kande attempts to show how the concept of ethnic group is itself a product of Western relations with the non-Western world, and not necessarily a valid concept of its own. This is balanced with a provisional attempt by K. Sevo and G. Mountali to redefine ethnicity in an anthropological and historical context.

The final section, "Recherches diverses," is indeed diverse, ranging from a study of the terms of trade of peasants dealing in palm oil in early colonial Dahomey by H. Almeida-Topor, through several studies of colonial policies and economic developments, to a more traditional study of the history of Air by Dijibo Hamani. As in the other sections, most of these are in the form of research reports or spin-off work from larger projects which the authors are now exploring.

The value of this brief and hastily prepared book is largely in its timeliness, for it shows the reader the state of current research in France and presages likely developments, especially in African economic history (though not all the work is in this field) both from students still working on degrees and from more established members of the field moving on to new projects. One can easily imagine in reading the book the lively discussion and stimulating environment of the seminars which inspired it.

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*Oedipus and Job in West African Religions* is surely one of the recognized classics of the anthropology of religion. Meyer Fortes's short monograph has been reissued by Cambridge, accompanied by a comparative study of four West African "social psychologies" by Robin Horton.

*Oedipus and Job* was originally delivered as the Fraser lecture in 1957. In it Fortes developed a distinctive approach to the analysis of African belief systems, one that has radical implications for understanding the relationship between the individual and society on the one hand and the systemic nature of African thought on the other. The implications of Fortes's work have yet to be fully realized.

Fortes's contribution to methodology takes two forms in *Oedipus and Job*. The analysis was designed to oppose what Fortes called "generalized ethnographic descriptions" in which ethnic groups are asserted to believe in one cultural item or another or behave in one fashion or another without reference to the specifics of time and place. Fortes was particularly concerned to examine
Tallensi ancestor worship in three contexts: the context of the situation, the context of personal history, and the context of social relationships. For Fortes, belief was important primarily as a mode of action, for what it does and not for what it says, even though he recognized that saying is a way of enabling the doing. He saw that the principles that organize belief systems are to be found not in cosmologies isolated from practice but in the practice of the cosmology itself. What gives the system such system as it has, he shows, are the ways that the actors order it unintentionally to govern their lives.

Fortes was neither an unreconstructed utilitarian nor a structuralist about these matters. He had a lively appreciation of the natural and social constraints on practice and action. His contextual approach provided him with a means of demonstrating the effects of biology and social structure on action at the same time as he endeavors to show that our biological nature and social relations are the material out of which we fashion our goals.

In this study of Tallensi ancestor worship Fortes used his analytical framework to examine a specific formation, Tallensi ancestor worship and father-son relationships. Fortes argued that the Tallensi interpreted misfortunes in terms of two major themes in their lives. Both of these have to do with attitudes towards authority. The first is the Oedipal theme, that fate is predetermined and conflict with authority inevitable. The second theme is "Jobian." Struggle with authority results in recognizing that unquestioning submission to it is the proper role in life. God's assertion to Job, "I am that I am," has its parallels with the attitude taken by Tallensi ancestors.

In order to highlight these themes Fortes started off by using their classical and biblical referents to illustrate their universal quality. The myth of Oedipus and the book of Job thus provide what Fortes calls "paradigmatic" cases. The use of models or paradigms is Fortes's second major methodological contribution, but it has never been taken seriously among anthropologists and Horton dismisses it out of hand in his generally complimentary comments on Fortes. Yet it demonstrates Fortes's almost obsessive concern with the tension between the biologically universal and the socially contingent that lies at the center of what is most original in his contributions to social thought and social anthropology. All societies must cope with the problems of growth and development, Fortes saw, but all societies do not evolve the same means of coping.

The result is that the interpretation of experience does not take place in a vacuum but in the contexts specified by Fortes. Neither society nor cosmology are primary in this conception of the sociology of belief. Instead they both emerge out of the actions of the Tallensi engaged simply in managing their lives. This is "pragmatic religion," as Igor Kopytoff terms it. African religions and systems of thought are not philosophies for Fortes, but rather modes of living. Beliefs are not "refracted" by the contexts in which they emerge, as Evans-Pritchard argued in Nuer Religion; in Fortes's view, they are part and parcel of social process.

The Tallensi were the vehicle Fortes used to develop this conception of religion. He demonstrated that Tallensi ideas about an "evil predestiny" are invoked to account for those Tallensi disenfranchised from full social
participation: barren women and childless men. Fortes then went on to examine Oedipal and Jobian themes that relate to two connected but conflicting processes, the developmental cycle of the domestic group and the growth of children into physically and mentally mature adults. Among the Tallensi full social adulthood can only begin to be conferred after the death of a man's father. Yet adult male children desire to acquire their full rights. Tallensi ancestor worship transposes the resulting conflicts from the arena of the domestic group to the religious arena of the ancestor cult, from father-son conflict to ancestor-descendant struggle. The ancestors "safeguard the moral order," according to Fortes, by intervening in the lives of their descendants and causing illness and other forms of misfortune. They do not do so in order to uphold general moral and ethical prescriptions but to punish transgressions against the ancestors. They seek unquestioning obedience and actions that satisfy their demands. This is the essential form of "pietas" that Fortes found so characteristic of ancestor worship.

Because fathers mediate between their sons and the ancestors there is some sense in which they share the status of both but move towards ancestorhood. At the same time, their sons become increasingly differentiated from their fathers, as they move into the external social world. These separate but often competing processes - fathers' assumption of increasing authority and their sons' assumption of independence - are given recognition in the changing configuration of ancestors worshiped at lineage shrines. The increasing independence of the child is checked by the cult of the ancestors or explained through the theme of evil prenatal destiny until the "aging geront," as Fortes once termed him, is deprived of authority through the finality of death.

This complex argument is concerned with the religious basis of social solidarity, questions about the cultural definition of the person, and ideas about the psychology of interpersonal processes. Fortes was particularly concerned here, as in so many of the last essays he wrote, with what he called the "actor-centered point of view." His interest was in how religion and ideas of personhood were expository of social conflict at the same time as they were mechanisms for muting conflict that could not be resolved in any final sense. Thus, Fortes ends Oedipus and Job with the following argument:

The [Tallensi] concept of predestiny may be taken to designate tendencies that originate in organic sources and in the earliest experiences of infantile dependence. It is of profound interest that these tendencies appear to be intuitively recognized in many societies and are deemed to manifest themselves in unwitting resistance to the normal relationships of parenthood. Ancestor- or deity-worship, on the one hand, presupposes the triumph of parenthood. It recognizes the paramountcy of the moral norms emanating from society as a whole over the dangerous egotism of childhood (p. 40).

There is much here that could be criticized, such as the overvaluation of authority against rebellion or the neglect of ideas about the destiny of women, but the extraordinary quality of Fortes's achievement should be highlighted.
Horton's accompanying essay barely does so. This may be because his criticism of Fortes's Freudian orientation blinds him to the interpretive dimension in Fortes's thought. Horton is critical of the use of Freud in *Oedipus and Job* on the grounds that Talensi ideas about the person and its destiny only superficially resemble Freud's division of the personality into id, ego, and superego. It is difficult to imagine why Fortes didn't assert the similarity if he found it there. His own writing provides better clues to the influence of psychoanalytic conceptions in his work. It seems to me that there are two ways in which Fortes drew on psychoanalytic theory, and both are illustrated in the passage quoted above.

First, Fortes insisted that biological processes forced themselves on social relations and had to be managed. They are "irreducible." For the Tallensi, maturation was one such process that drastically affected father-son relationships. These processes are only known socially, however, through the idioms in terms of which the actors interpret their experience; they are "intuitively recognized," Fortes asserts. How does this process of recognition occur? I believe that Fortes drew far more of his inspiration from clinical psychoanalytic theory than is generally recognized. Fortes argues consistently throughout *Oedipus and Job* that the Tallensi project their father-son relationships onto the ancestors. Projection is a primary mechanism in religious experience and a characteristic way the Tallensi have of interpreting their conflict. Hence Fortes sees Tallensi ancestor worship an an interpretive means of understanding biologically based social conflict through transposing it to another realm. Projection is not the only mechanism at work in ancestor worship, however. According to clinical psychoanalytic theory, the analyst-patient relationship is organized in terms of transference of affective dispositions which will ultimately enable a more objective and distanced perspective on the self and its problems. This carries with it, however, a serious interpretive dilemma. If we transfer our dispositions onto others and interpret them as emotions of love and hate, for example, how can we ever know others for what they are? So much of what we call theories of personhood seem to me to be indigenous epistemologies that grapple with the radical indeterminacy of knowledge of the self and other. Fortes explored this issue among the Tallensi through a description of the Tallensi theory of the mind, a theme picked up in social anthropology most notably by Godfrey Lienhardt in *Divinity and Experience* and Grace Harris in *Casting Out Anger*.

The Tallensi have, according to Fortes, a "lively awareness of differences in character" but they see the development of the self as an imposition from without rather than a growth from within. Hence Tallensi constructions of personal histories are articulated in terms of idioms of external agency. Projection and transference are interpretive processes associated with cultural beliefs that define the person. These beliefs form a system primarily through the interpretations actors use to make sense out of their social and intrapsychic experiences and conflicts. Custom provides guides when internal standards are unable to resolve the problems presented by the contexts of social structure, personal history, and situation.

This complex argument is woven into a dense and engaging analysis of the Tallensi that draws on parallels in West Africa and elsewhere. In his
extended comment, Robin Horton takes a more distanced perspective than Fortes. He compares ideas about destiny and fate among four related West African peoples, the Tallensi, the Kalabari, the Yoruba, and the Ashanti. Among all four he perceives a commonly held distinction between "spirits of nature" and "spirits of society." Each of the four groups pursues a different strategy for allocating external influences on the fate of the person. The Tallensi rely primarily on spirits of society and this is related to the pronounced emphasis on conformity and control of juniors in Tallensi society. While the Kalabari have much the same ideas about parental influences on destiny, they regard spirits of nature as more important than spirits of society and pay more attention to the destiny of women. Horton sees this as related to a historical factor, the position of the Kalabari in trade and the development of trading societies among them. The Yoruba put a unique stamp on the commonly held complex of ideas about destiny and the fate of the person. Like the Kalabari they invoke spirits of nature to explain individual fate. This is consonant with the stress placed on achievement on both worlds. A major difference is the distinctive pattern of Orisha worship in Yoruba societies. There individual destiny is tied to a complex of nature spirits who exhibit diverse personalities. This fits with the high value placed not only on personal attainment among the Yoruba but with the degree to which they have elaborated personal styles associated with social differentiation. Finally the Ashanti have developed their own unique interpretation of this complex. Again individual achievement is related to "forces of nature," not spirits. The distinctive Ashanti interpretation is that forces of society and forces of nature exist in precarious balance among them and are related through a controlling concept, kra, which strives to balance the two forces. This is explained by what Horton sees as the distinctive and dominating feature of Ashanti social experience, the almost crippling division of the individual's loyalties between localized matrilineal descent groups and the cross-cutting governmental and societal institutions. The former are related to forces of society and the latter to forces of nature.

Horton's distanced perspective is easier to grasp than Fortes's more engaged point of view. Obviously Horton relies heavily on a major aspect of Fortes's work, the distinction between centripetal and centrifugal forces affecting the actors' decisions. Horton's most significant conclusion is that the Tallensi represent one end of a continuum between social structures that exhibit stress on conformity, as the Tallensi do, and social structures in which the individual is given far more room to maneuver, as among the other three. Horton believes the Tallensi to be relatively unique in West Africa.

This may be, but the mode of presenting the evidence does not leave me convinced. The gain in clarity and system entails a loss in sensitivity of description. The two studies operate at different levels and make comparison difficult. Fortes was primarily concerned with the interpretive decisions made by people managing the most awful moments of their lives. They were vitally concerned with matters of life and death, with questions of power, autonomy, and the right to control others. Horton's Olympian view, in common with much of his writing on African systems of thought, leaves the context out of the account. What is missing from his analysis is the interpretive dilemma, the way actors
relate their experience to their interpretation of what has happened. This is central, it seems to me, both to Fortes's thought and to what I know about African religions and systems of thought.

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The members of the Associated Laboratory 221 (CNRS-EPHE, Paris) on "Systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire," led by Luc de Heusch and Michel Cartry with the assistance of Germaine Dieterlen, began to study the subject of sacrifice in 1975. They started with data already available in their field notes, then went on to do ethnographic research specifically on sacrifice in Africa. The results of their work have been published in four "cahiers" on sacrifice (1976,1978,1979,1981) and in De Heusch's recent study in English, Sacrifice in Africa: A Structuralist Approach (Bloomington, 1985). This is the fifth volume in the "cahiers" series.

In this volume, Le Moal details the correlations between the characteristics of sacrificial victims and other kinds of offerings used in the rituals of the Bobo Fing of Upper Volta and the qualities of the "entités" to which they are given. Jespers discusses the significance of dog sacrifices at all important rites of passage among the Minyanka of Mali, in the context of the widespread denigration or prohibition of such sacrifices throughout most of Africa. Sanogo's analysis of sacrifice in Worodougou funeral rites in the Ivory Coast focuses on the connections between rights to certain parts of the sacrificial animal and the powers attributed to participating groups. Bertaux discusses the relationship of the "words" that come from "the earth's mouth" in the course of Bambara geomancy involving sand-figures and the words of oracular powers associated with the wilderness which the diviner invokes prior to the consultation. De Heusch's essay, inspired by Mary Douglas's research on the Lele, compares the different roles of the large and small varieties of pangolin in sacrifices among neighboring groups in Zaire. In the final essay, Mellott provides English summaries of the essays published in French in the preceding four volumes of the series.

All of the contributors emphasize that their purpose is necessarily modest: to publish concrete accounts of the details of sacrificial rites, based on the intensive investigation of particular cases, on the grounds that this kind of information is surprisingly absent from most of the literature on religion in Africa (only De Heusch's essay is deliberately comparative). In this volume, the ethnography pertains primarily to ritual procedures: lists of participants according to generic category (eldest son, married daughter, maternal uncle, and so on); accounts of procedures, with close attention to required materials; and some information, drawn primarily from myths and divination practices, concerning the significance of these categories, procedures, and materials. There is very little information about social relations and, as a consequence, very little