

*Explorations in African
Systems of Thought*

Edited by

Ivan Karp

&

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Preface to the 1987 Edition

More than five years have passed since *Explorations* was first published. Since that time the outlines of a number of developments in anthropology and related disciplines have become clearer. Many of the essays in this volume contribute to these movements, and the occasion of this reissue provides an opportunity to situate them in the current scene. Even though the test of time of half a decade is slight, the continued interest in the essays Charles Bird and I brought together is gratifying. For this new preface I want to highlight three themes that have begun to appear increasingly important for the comparative and interpretative enterprise in which my colleagues and I are engaged. These are: the twin problems of interpretation and representation; the theorization of the related concepts of power, personhood and agency; and problems of history and social transformation.

The Problems of Interpretation and Representation

Underlying my choice of topics is a sense that both the act of interpretation and its objective correlative, the act of representation, are filled with political and epistemological difficulties. Recent work in anthropology and history acknowledges these difficulties and demonstrates an acute consciousness about the conditions under which the disciplines charged with representing the experience of the other go about their tasks (Clifford, Clifford and Marcus, Fabian, Karp and Kendall, Marcus and Fisher, Mudimbe, Veyne, White).

These difficulties are never so acute as when the descriptive and analytical task involves documenting and analyzing another system of thought. My original introduction to these essays ended by emphasizing the epistemological problems inherent in the task of interpretation. The introduction was less successful, as was the volume as a whole, in focusing on how the act of representing the systems of thought found in other cultures has political consequences, and sometimes even political motives. None of the contributors fully examined the element of power inherent in the production of knowledge about African systems of thought, although many of them were critical of the frequent failure of observers to turn their comparative lens back upon themselves.

I did maintain in the Introduction, however, that the essays took as their starting points the criteria by which Africans defined and interpreted their social and natural worlds. Almost all the authors argued, explicitly in my Introduction and by example in the essays, that such seemingly transparent descriptive categories as "witchcraft" or "spirit possession" tended to obliterate categories and interpretative criteria by which Africans give sense to their experience.

The two exceptions to what has now become orthodoxy in interpretative social science were the essays by W. Arens and Wyatt MacGaffey. Arens's essay on "witchcraft" accusations in the polyethnic farming and trading community of Mto wa Mbu, Tanzania, argues that the most significant issue is not the cross-cultural validity of our own categories but whether they are an aspect of the social formation being described. In Mto wa Mbu the distinction between witchcraft and sorcery is not an ethnocentric imposition on a people who do not distinguish between technical and mystical means but rather an integral aspect of their explanation of social change.

This assertion is challenged by Wyatt MacGaffey's structural model of elements in indigenous formulations of social roles that are associated with "mystical" agents. MacGaffey is also interested in indigenous sociology, but situates his analysis at a deeper structural level. He argues for an approach that breaks social roles down into a limited number of elements and then shows how the roles are constructed out of those elements. Hence he suggests that the underlying criteria that Africans use to define "witchcraft" and "sorcery" are found cross-culturally and are put together in a limited number of distinctive patterns that people use to explain the effects attributed by them to mystical agents, political office holders, and other persons to whom causal powers are attributed. While Arens explores the surface contours of ideologies and MacGaffey their constituent elements, both of their essays lead to a more dynamic conception of African systems of thought. They both see the patterning of belief as emerging in historically specific conditions, and not as a feature of some free-floating "cultural system" that is not subject to change.

The essays that specifically focused on interpretative criteria and how African peoples understand events are my own examination of Iteso contexts in which beer drinking is a prominent feature, Ben Ray's discussion of the ontology of death among the Baganda, and Jim Fernandez's critique of the unconscious reproduction of Western genres

of discourse in comparative psychology. A primary goal of this set of essays was to show how important and subtle are local forms of knowledge in defining and interpreting experience.

In "Beer Drinking and Social Experience" I argued that the emotional dimensions in the experience of events had often been neglected and that a more cognitive orientation had been privileged in the interpretation of ritual and symbolism of African societies. My vehicle for this was the very complex set of associations and contexts in which beer drinking was imbedded among the Iteso living in Kenya. My strategy was a common one in anthropology. Take a form commonly found in many societies and demonstrate that it takes its meaning and, in this case, emotional coloration, from custom, society, cosmology, and experience. What had been familiar becomes culturally specific. The cost of such a procedure is that the process of estrangement turns the seemingly familiar into the exotic, and perhaps the merely curious. My solution for avoiding this trap was to examine the culturally specific as locally produced attempts to resolve dilemmas of experience that have more than local resonance. I showed that Iteso beer drinking was intimately involved with ideals of sociability and difficulties of achieving them, and that this was a central emotional difficulty of Iteso experience of the social world. That this account had cross-cultural resonance was brought home to me when I was interviewed for a position by the president of a university in Boston, shortly after this essay was published. He remarked that reading "Beer Drinking" helped him understand his experience of the elite Boston clubs he had to attend as part of his job. Thinking more of my Iteso materials than the opportunity in front of me, I replied that reminded me of Groucho Marx's comment that he "didn't care to belong to any club that would have him as a member." The president was not amused.

Ben Ray also interprets the material from the Baganda of Uganda as exhibiting differences and affinities with Western belief and experience. Seemingly familiar forms such as myth and folklore are used by the Baganda to express ontological concerns. He shows that the seemingly obvious separation between kinship and folklore does not work among the Baganda. Folklore and ontology are implicated in each other, each forming the grounds whereby the other is used to respond to such experiences as situations of death produce. For the Baganda the advent of death produces kinship as they know it, and kinship is not only a means of relating to one another, but a frame in which their experience of mortality is interpreted.

Jim Fernandez took an even more radical approach to the problem of translation. He argued that interpretive procedures defining the relevance of talk, gesture, and event were part and parcel of every genre, every form of local knowledge. His paper pointed to the general neglect on the part of many investigators to examine or specify the range of actions and objects contained within the orbit of forms of discourse.

The examination of ritual, lore, and custom as forms of discourse was a general theme of the collection, and, in my opinion, one of its more enduring contributions. This achievement can be seen in one of the most ethnographically rich contributions, Luc de Heusch's essay, "Heat, Physiology, and Cosmogony."

On one level de Heusch seeks to criticize Lévi-Strauss's odd assertion that all ritual is a "bastardization," a contradiction, of thought. De Heusch's essay was criticized by a few reviewers on the grounds that it illustrated a structuralist approach. It is now a dogmatic principle of academic folkbelief that structuralist analyses reduce the complexities of thought and action to binary oppositions. Even if this were so, it certainly is not true of de Heusch's work, where structuralist methods are used to demonstrate how a Thonga rite of passage draws on technology, knowledge of nature, and bodily symbolism in order to achieve its pragmatic and semantic effects. This is the richest kind of ethnography, all the more remarkable for being a reanalysis of a prestructuralist ethnography. It stands as a rebuke to the simpleminded antistructuralism that passes for criticism.

If including the element of discourse is a contribution of the first essays to interpretation and representation, then de Heusch's contribution broadens the notion of context to include the ensemble of rites and cosmology that provides the background that gives meaning to specific rituals. My own essay on beer drinking and de Heusch's demonstrate how much the perils of reproduction and reproductive imagery can dominate some African systems of thought.

History and Transformation

Not all African societies are so concerned as the Iteso and Bathonga with reproduction and the ritual controls that may be exercised over it. But we have as yet little sense of the range of ideologies displayed in the African experience, and even less sense of the transformations African social formations have undergone. Historians have been fond of accusing

anthropologists of picturing African societies as static and unchanging. There is an element of truth to this charge, but far too much of the historians' research on oral traditions in Africa has used them only as a means of uncovering events. Historical research has often failed to understand that African societies can have their own sense of history and that oral traditions can be vehicles for Africans to understand the social transformations they have undergone. Structuralist methods are indispensable in this enterprise, as Africanist works such as those by Miller, de Heusch, Feierman, and Packard amply illustrate, not mention Marshall Sahlins's well-known attempt at a structuralist interpretation of Hawaiian history (1981).

Randall Packard's essay provided an example of the powers of structuralist methods applied to the study of social transformations. He proved that social change was also a matter of intellectual history. In a fascinating account he showed that among the Bashu of Zaïre the changing image of women became a way of understanding the political and economic domination to which all the Bashu were subjected. For Bashu men their loss of control over their lives in the outside world was demonstrated by their loss of control over Bashu women, while Bashu women were beginning to use the male loss of autonomy to increase their freedom vis-à-vis Bashu men, but not in the wider world.

Packard's essay stands as a rebuke to the naive realist interpretation of oral history, which argues that critical methods can strip away the nonhistorical accretions and leave the kernel of historical truth (Vansina). A goodly body of literature now is available that demonstrates how important are conventions such as genres for understanding the communicative intentions embodied in oral traditions. Much of the best work on this topic comes out of the University of Wisconsin, not only from revisionist historians but from specialists in oral literature such as Harold Scheub and Donald Cosentino.

In *The African Past Speaks* (Miller, ed.) as well as in the work of scholars such as Feierman and Packard the skills of the critical historian of oral tradition are blended with the structuralist imagination to produce studies that are a major contribution to African history and the examination of African systems of thought.

An example of the value of such an approach is Roy Willis's *State in the Making*. This is a work written outside the revisionist Wisconsin orbit, but it still exhibits the same concern for how indigenous representations can encode historical change. Unlike Vansina's literalism, however,

Willis, in common with Packard's book and essay in this volume, and Feierman and de Heusch's *Drunken King*, appreciates the degree to which the materials Africanists call "oral traditions" can encode representations of historical transformations.

None of these works has yet solved the thorny problem of how to specify the processes and mechanisms of change. We have yet to grapple successfully with how to understand that transformations in the structure of social organization are also radical changes in concepts of the person and cosmological systems. One possible direction is to begin not with change but with continuity. This assertion smacks of heresy. I risk being called an "arid functionalist." Still, we have many splendid studies of how cultural and social continuity is achieved in African societies. While I can agree that they ignore the context of change and read out the effects of colonial domination, this is not a necessary consequence of much of the best work in Africa on social organization, a point I went to some pains to demonstrate in *Fields of Change among the Iteso of Kenya* (1978). In that work I was concerned to demonstrate that the analytic categories of structural-functional analysis such as "field" and "domain" were useful guides to understanding patterns of change when their definition included elements of a people's own indigenous sociology. I tried to show there and in my essay on beer drinking and social experience that these categories are heuristic devices that can be used to capture the actors' experience of contradiction and incoherence in society and history.

As social life is innately incoherent and contradictory it should be almost self-evident that the experience of life in society is virtually always one of falling short of goals and ideals. This is what T. O. Beidelman terms a "tragic" vision of social life (1986). But this is tragedy in the classic sense. Our inability to achieve perfection creates the possibility of change. We cannot do without analytical categories that enable us to examine the systemic aspects of the contrarities of social experience in larger historical terms. This theme is related to the tragic aspect of agency discussed below.

Continuity is only one side of the equation of how to understand historical transformations, but it is a necessary side. The moment of reproduction is potentially the moment of change (Karp 1986:136). This formula inverts Marx's famous dictum that change entails reproduction, but the best studies of historical transformations such as Marx's own *18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* understand that the act of using an order

to translate interests into practices both reproduces that order and establishes the possibility of its transformation.

Within the region of Africa I know best, East Africa, David Cohen's neglected study, *Womunafu's Bunafu*, brilliantly illustrates how an interest in the ideology of social reproduction can make a major contribution to understanding social and conceptual change. Cohen examines how a Soga community is captured by a state and transformed into a small-scale version of its court. All the cosmological resources of the Bacwezi myth are put to the ideological purpose of legitimizing the establishment of authority in the community by the illegitimate offspring of the king. The result is a radical transformation in community structure that entails such systemic changes in the meanings attributed to social forms and spatial arrangements. Cohen describes more than the expulsion of one dominant lineage from a community by another. He gives an account of a transformation in the identity of the community itself. What is portrayed here is the reproduction of a royal cosmology in a local community at the same time as that community is subjected to radical change as it is incorporated into a state. Hence reproduction at one level is change at another.

Cohen's book illustrates interconnections among the three themes I identified: representation; transformation; and power, person, and agency. The community of Bunafu underwent a historical transformation, a revolution in its system of collective representations, a change in power relations and authority structure. All of these were contained in the process whereby a local form of divine kingship was imposed. Divine kingship itself includes a theory of personhood and agency. Divine kings are figures with the capacity to bring about special effects such as control of the environment, a capacity not granted to other, more secular figures. Efficacy is one of the most basic definitions of power: the capacity to bring about an event.

Power, Personhood, and Agency

Many of the papers in *Explorations* were concerned with problems of power, personhood, and agency. Two that mediated between the interest in transformation and the later themes were the articles by Dan Bauer and John Hinnant and by Igor Kopytoff. In "Normal and Revolutionary Divination" Bauer and Hinnant show how specific interpretive processes could fit into dynamic and changing social orders in different ways. A

seemingly unitary phenomenon, divination, has rather different ideological functions. The Galla were subjugated under the hegemony of the Ethiopian state. As a result divination served to challenge the assumptions about the distribution of power embodied in their cosmology. In the Tigre example, divination supported political authority by explaining away any deviation that occurred.

Igor Kopytoff's description of the rise and fall of cults among the Suku of Zaïre took another tack. Among the Suku, cult membership is labile and cults rise and fall with regularity. Kopytoff argues that these cults are rites of passage that achieve no permanent transition of status for their members. Instead the cults are designed to combat the entropy the Suku see as a fundamental, "natural," aspect of their world. In an analysis that also has its parallels with Kuhn, Kopytoff demonstrates how the evidence that entropy occurs in spite of cult activities continues to accumulate. Hence new cults arise. An implication I draw from Kopytoff's account is that cults are means of acquiring power to combat entropy. They provide their members with greater capacity to control the world, with higher powers. Thus power, its acquisition and control, may lie at the heart of the dynamics of cults among the Suku.

Kopytoff's essay is not optimistic about African initiatives. There is a ironic element here: Suku attempts to create power and manage the course of events are doomed to failure. Their experience of failure accounts for the changing nature of cults among them. Kopytoff shares with Beidelman an ironic, even tragic view of social life. In Beidelman's essay on gender differences among the Baraguyu and Kaguru he focuses on the pathos of gender. He describes a tragic world in which men and women strive to achieve gender ideals of sexuality and procreativity but fail. There are degrees of freedom here. Women are more constrained by their biological role and a hostile environment than men, but aging and the vicissitudes of sexual performance affect men more than women. The tension Beidelman describes is between socially ascribed and constructed and the biological and personal aspects of experience. Beidelman perceives an innate discrepancy between the two, as well as between the social person and the individual. As Beidelman points out elsewhere, cultural forms are unable to contain the experience predicated by them. They always spill over into uncertainty and indeterminacy (1986).

The essays by Vaughan and by Bird and Kendall explore the connections among the world we want, the one society predicated, and

our experiences of them. For James Vaughan divine kingship is aging writ large. The death of the divine king represents the inevitable constraints to which all succumb. At the same time, the divine king also stands for the social forms people use to attempt to overcome the inevitable. While Vaughan understands the tragic element, he ends by quoting Ionesco to show that the tragic and the absurd adhere to one another in social ideals.

Bird and Kendall deal with a remarkable formation, an ideology of personhood that seems explicitly to recognize, even elevate the contrary elements explored in so many of the other essays. Mande oral literature pictures a world of competing demands and desires. The person is torn between the reproductive urges of *badenya* and the individual glories of *fadenya*. On the one hand he is almost required to desert his kin in search of glory that will only ultimately bring value to the group, and on the other hand he is urged to create the conditions for reproduction at home.

It almost seems as if the Mande have been reading social anthropology. I find striking parallels with my own essay on Iteso ideals of sociability. The difference is that Mande representations enshrine both individuality and cohesiveness as ideals of personhood. My account of Iteso attitudes toward self control and bodily discipline tends to show that they have a distinct hierarchy of values that cuts across situations. For them unbridled individuality brings individual and social destruction. It is both inevitable and always to be guarded against. They seem to fear magic less than the Mande but have a darker social ideology. For them agency has a more nightmarish quality.

Comparison, in the end, is the point. Power and agency are themes that cut across almost all the essays in the book. These essays indicate that a different view of power is exhibited in African societies than in Western social science. The stress in Africa is not on the element of control, but on the more dynamic aspect of energy and the capacity to use it. The African ideas of power described in this book have to do with engaging power and creating or at least containing the world. They may allow for the possibility of transformation in a way that Western social science concepts of power do not.

Transformation is only possible through the agency of actors. While this is true for all the peoples portrayed here, there are real differences in how the world they act in is constructed by them. These differences are more than matters of world view; they concern different attitudes

toward life and different ideas about the possibility of action. This may be the most enduring contribution of this volume, one that may last a bit more than half a decade. The essays here expose African images of how the world might be, and demonstrate how various are the images, the potentialities, that Africans devise.

Ivan Karp

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