

*Creativity of*  
**POWER**

*Cosmology and Action  
in African Societies*

*Edited by W. Arens  
and Ivan Karp*

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*Dedicated to the memory of Meyer Fortes  
with grateful thanks for his continuing inspiration*

## *Introduction*

The essays in this volume explore the seemingly familiar concepts of power, action, and human agency in African social systems and cosmologies.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the simplicity and adequacy of this statement is immediately cancelled by the fact that the average English-language dictionary offers a dozen or more definitions of the meaning of power. These move uneasily between the mechanical and the spiritual implications of the word. Moreover, there is a considerable literature devoted to the specific sociological analysis and application of the concept. Yet, as one prominent sociological commentator has remarked, no consensus on the definition of power has ever been achieved. Hence each discussion begins anew with a preliminary clarification of the intended usage (Dahrendorf 1959: 166).

A frequent response to this situation is influenced by the model of analysis found in ordinary language philosophy. This orientation assumes that clear a priori definitions are neither useful nor necessary and that meaning can be sought in patterns of use. Furthermore, it assumes that the quest for a clear and concise definition of any concept is both

naive and distorting, as there is no correspondence in the external world to match the multiple significances of utterances (Clegg 1975:8). The danger here is that neither *definition* nor *use* will be carefully examined and power will be taken to be a common sense, transparently clear, concept.

This line of reasoning is taken by the editors of a recent volume of essays on power in a cross-cultural perspective who conveniently dismiss the problem by concluding that the term power is an "intellectual catch-all" (Fogelson and Adams 1977:xi). This is undoubtedly the case in cross-cultural studies of "power," but disarming the issue in such a manner fails to address adequately the problem of how this has come to be the case. It is not unreasonable to ask why the concept of power should lend itself so easily to a variety of situations and interpretations, instead of producing a uniform and comparable literature.

This question has not gone unanswered, and in an authoritative essay that reviews the intellectual history of the concept, the sociologist Steven Lukes convincingly argues that embracing a particular view of power "arises out of and operates within a particular moral and political perspective" (1978:26). Citing the philosopher Gallie, he refers to power as "an essentially contested concept" which "inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of the users" (Gallie 1955-56:169). Lukes concludes, therefore, that the attempt to define power is in itself a subtle form of intellectual politics, a rhetorical gesture. The act of definition implies a particular view of the nature of society, political institutions, the goals of action, and the means used to achieve them. Lukes does not add, as we would, that the semantic equivalents of "power" in different languages and cultures embody as much a view of society and human action as they do in the Western social sciences.

This observation is directed toward what we think is the significance of this volume. The concept of "power" as it is used by all peoples encodes ideas about the nature of the world, social relations, and the effects of actions in and on the world and the entities that inhabit it.<sup>2</sup> We explicitly argue that power must be viewed in part as an artifact of the imagination and a facet of human creativity, and as such a fertile field of investigation for social anthropology. The essays in this volume show how choosing this perspective produces greater insights into the conceptual problems involved; they also broaden the intellectual horizons of scholarship by confronting the indigenous definitions of the social scientists with the different ways in which power is thought to be generated and put to use in social life by other locals. Yet even this statement begs the

question of the way in which the idea of power is understood and employed by the social scientists in this volume to confront the others whose concepts of power they describe and analyze.

Any consideration of the notion of power must surely begin with reference to the work of Max Weber, whose ideas, so dominant and influential in the other social sciences, have been largely ignored in social anthropology.<sup>3</sup> As many of the essays in this volume attest, however, Weber's ideas lead to valuable insights into the nature of domestic and public political activities in the sense of the quest of one social actor to gain influence over others.

If Weber's typology of political systems has been generally unused by anthropologists, his definition of power has been accepted and used by almost all social scientists. According to Weber, "power (*Macht*) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in the position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (1964:152). This famous definition often provides the basic premise for more extended and abstract discussions of power (see Parsons 1963), so it is worthwhile to consider some of its implications.<sup>4</sup>

First, Weber's view conceives of power as arising from relationships between social actors in a mutually acknowledged competitive or cooperative context. Power is exercised for the achievement of practical ends through the mechanisms of domination and submission. Furthermore, the focus is primarily on the pursuit of individual rather than collective goals, for it views power as the outcome and expression of dyadic relationships. This perspective fails to examine one of the oldest and most important problems in social theory, that is, the relationship between individual actions and collectively defined ends (Emmett 1972).

Second, this framework implies that the source of power is found in human agents who exercise their rationality to calculate the costs and returns of using different means in the pursuit of accepted ends. This is precisely how Weber distinguishes between power and authority. Power is rational and authority is accepted without reflection; that is, it is *legitimate*. In Weber's view, Western bureaucratized social systems elevate rational calculation to the status of a norm. This elevation is not universally shared by all peoples, as Weber explicitly recognized in his own typology of social systems.

The view of power as rational calculation emphasizes the exercise of power and the pursuit of goals, which raises the third problem. The framework fails to consider how concepts of power are used by agents to

produce their actions or how those concepts are grounded in cultural resources. Most accounts of the exercise of power and political relationships presume that these are secularly based, even when religious activities are being described. The consequence is a twofold failure in analysis. First, many studies exhibit a tendency toward a universalizing stance, which many African philosophers have decried as ethnocentric (Hontoundji 1983; Mudimbe 1988). These accounts view the universal source and application of power relationships as almost always secular, unvarying in time and space. Second, many studies reveal a static view of both power relationships and culture. They fail to provide an account of how cultural resources are used in guiding actions, defining goals, interpreting the experience of such "power" relationships as domination and subordination, or even expressing legitimacy. As a result culture is only an aspect of power, usually called "political culture." We have little sense of how the actors make these beliefs and values relevant while they use these beliefs and values in pursuit of their interests.

A valuable alternative to Weber's approach has been articulated by David Parkin in his introduction to *Semantic Anthropology* (1982:xlvi): "Power rests not simply on the acquisition of land and material objects but rather derives from unequal access to semantic creativity, including the capacity to nominate others as equal or unequal, animate or inanimate, memorable or abject, discussor or discussed." This perspective moves us away from an exclusive emphasis on the exercise of power and provides room for examining the relationship between power and consciousness. It encompasses the subtle insights of Simmel (1950), for example, who remarked that domination "is not so much the exploitation of the other as much as the mere consciousness of the possibility" (p. 151).

We could even question whether assumptions about the culturally transparent nature of power make sense in the context of the Western industrialized and rationalized social systems so well-known to Weber and succeeding generations of sociologists and political scientists. Rationality as a norm is not often the defining principle of forms of social organization. Rationality as a process can be grounded in assumptions other than rational choice theory.<sup>5</sup> Yet the majority of anthropological studies of non-Western political systems and political action are restricted to this focus on the exercise of power as manifested in the form of influence and control over others' behavior, usually situated in its relationship to roles and institutional settings. In fact, few studies in political anthropology, considered to be one of the major subdisciplines, adopt what we would consider an anthropological perspective, which involves a conceptualiza-

tion of power as it relates to other aspects of the encompassing cosmological system.<sup>6</sup> While this may not be surprising in sociology and political science, it is a striking ellipsis in anthropology, which asserts that cultural forms affect the structure of social action.

Anthropologists should therefore consider indigenous concepts carefully and recognize that the comprehensive study of power involves "all conceivable qualities of a person and all conceivable combinations of circumstances" (Weber 1947:153). This implies that the study of political relations involves more than the recognition that power is what power does. It also entails the recognition that power is how power means, and that interpretations may vary from place to place and time to time. Clastres (1987) made this point in stark terms when he observed that the model of political power usually used by social scientists is constituted within a Western cultural context, which then obscures the beliefs and experiences of those sought to be understood (p. 16).

As Adams (1977) notes, power can also be examined as an aspect of the locally defined cosmos in the form of an immanent force derived from some "extra-human" agency (p. 390). This view of power as a cultural construct leads to the conclusion that images of power entail ideas about the nature of society, the nature of nature itself, and the nature of human actions. It also leads to a definition of human social and personal potential, as these may be contrasted with the capacities of other causal agents. The general failure among anthropologists to consider power in this ideational capacity has meant that some of the more interesting comparative insights into the operation of power in society remain unexplored. One such comparison might be drawn between ideas about power and the means through which power is inscribed in relationships. Another comparison might be made between societies that possess writing as a means of asserting and storing differences in power and those that reproduce power and conflict in ritual and symbol formation.<sup>7</sup> We suggest that a necessary feature of any investigation into the exercise of control, or the resistance to control, should be an analysis of the cultural premises that give meaning to such behavior. Power may always involve the exercise of an individual's will over another's, but the rationale and basis for domination, acquiescence, and resistance may vary considerably from one cultural setting to another.

An ethnography of domination should identify the cultural notions that compel the group to accept the direction of a few—or suffer the presumed consequences. This is a question about legitimacy and suggests that power takes varied ideological forms. It should be of paramount

concern to an anthropological inquiry, in contrast to a one-sided concentration on the mechanisms for exercising power. Sources of legitimacy need not be secular and rational. We can not presume that they are derived from the resolution of disputes among human agents or that they only emerge out of considerations of political purpose. The idea that what is defined as legitimate is the natural outcome of rational decision-making is a classic instance of the hegemonic extension of an ideology over increasingly large sectors of peoples' lives. Debates over definition and ontological considerations cannot be reduced to questions of practicality. Even a brief consideration of recent history suggests that social systems, including ours, are not systematic and coherent. They are composed of groups and individuals who continually define their lives in contraposition to seemingly accepted norms. This is the stuff of which resistance is sometimes made (Scott 1985). Perhaps resistance is too strong a concept. The point is that power does not emanate from a single source and social formations are composed of centers and epicenters of power in dynamic relationship with one another. Domination and subordination operate on both sides of all relationships, even between two persons, since dependence and control are shared unequally among the actors. The key question is not how power is centralized; it isn't. The key question is how the illusion that power organizes a social formation composed of a center and a periphery emerges and acts in society.

This illusion implies that power emanates from a single or central source. This idea has obvious affinities with the rise of the modern state. It brings us to the concept of authority, to those concepts and processes that legitimize the exercise of power. As Lukes (1978:639) informs us, definitions of authority tend to be two-tiered. They place the exercise of power in the public arena, where the state claims hegemony over social action and defines the rights of persons. There is also a second tier; it defines not the *where* of power but the *who*. Lukes reminds us that authority entails an appeal to legitimizing values and not to practical reason. He identifies three types of justifications that underpin ideologies of authority: belief or faith, convention, and imposition (Lukes 1978). Foucault (1978) argues in a similar vein that "power is tolerable only on condition it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (p. 6).

The utility of the distinction between power and authority is apparent in many of the conclusions drawn by the contributions to this volume, which show that power is multicentered and, further, that the idea of a center may itself be produced through the ideology of power. The

essays avoid a common problem encountered in political anthropology—a movement from a concern with how power and authority interact and are experienced in society to a conclusion that power is both rational and real and authority is simply mystifying. This is the notion behind Maurice Bloch's unfortunate attempts to argue that ritual embodies the false claims of authority over the real exercise of power.<sup>8</sup>

In this context, we believe that the African societies analyzed in the following pages do more than merely "mask" the exercise of power with a more emphatic concern for the relationship between this and the other world. Members of these societies assert that the source of power resides in the interaction between natural, social, and supernatural realms. This contrasts with the ideal image of Western political systems. Arrangements in the liberal social democratic tradition typically draw attention to the common good and the consent of the governed as paramount ideological features, in order to obfuscate the potential exercise of power for the achievement of the political ends of a particular segment of society. In many African social systems, however, the exercise of political influence derives from access to and work upon the natural and supernatural spheres, both as the source of power to control others and as the legitimization for actions. As a consequence, power in itself has a different cultural foundation, since it involves several domains ordinarily separated in experience and practice.

Thus, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) remarked some time ago that "an African ruler is not to his people merely a person who can enforce his will on them. He is the axis of their political relations, the symbol of their unity and exclusiveness, and the embodiment of their essential values" (p. 17). The programmatic implications of this statement, which pointed to the cultural significance of such offices and their incumbents as symbolic mediators, was by and large ignored for some time in political anthropology. An interest in this approach was revived primarily by Beidelman's re-analyses of the role of priests and prophets among the acephalous Nuer of the Nilotic Sudan (1971) and the Incwala ceremony of the Swazi of Southern Africa (1966). In the latter ceremony, Beidelman not only demonstrated that the Swazi king is a figure who mediates between the normally opposed spheres of the indigenous cosmology, but, more significantly from the present perspective, he is thought to annually regenerate the cosmos itself by his actions. Thus "the pathos" and power of the Swazi king is demonstrated at the moment that he "takes the filth of the nation on himself" (Beidelman, 1966:396; Lienhardt 1961). These and subsequent insights, which also focus on regeneration,

draw our attention to the use of different cultural idioms in the attempt to comprehend widespread conceptions of the essence of power and its practitioners in Africa (see Kopytoff 1980, Packard 1982, and Vaughan 1980).

First among these is the recognition of the role of ritual, especially in the context of royal installation or renewal ceremonies, which set in motion the attempt to tap the inherent forces of the universe. These studies illustrate how the human imagination creates systems of transformation that channel creative forces into their own lives. Such activities, which are now well understood from the existing literature, involve symbolic activities that bring together domains normally viewed as best kept apart. The ritual behavior creates danger for those most intimately involved, and as such they demonstrate their control over such situations and emerge as sources of power themselves. In the course of the rituals indigenous conceptions of power undergo permutations, as they are transformed into capacities which are characteristic of the office and its incumbent. This process of redefinition becomes a feature of political ideology in the form of legitimization.

Anthropologists have customarily viewed social life as a process, and have recognized politics in particular as a series of purposefully related activities (see Swartz, Turner and Tuden 1966). Such interpretations also involve the recognition of social transformations, such as the interaction between economic and political systems, in which one type of control is converted into another. We suggest here a similar orientation toward the construction of power, which would be consistent with the conceptualization of the exercise of control in its behavioral context. According to this perspective, power takes on various forms in both the cultural and social domains. As Russell (1938) argued, a legitimate concern of social science is to recognize and explore the paths of such transformations in the cultural universe (pp. 13–14). This view not only provides a broader spectrum of analysis, but it also offers a more encompassing grasp of the definition of power in the many senses it takes in English usage. Power thus becomes a series of ideas linked with actions, which have an effect on other ideas and actions, rather than merely a characteristic of isolated situations of social interaction.

Interpreting power in this polymorphic and dynamic fashion also draws attention to contrasting definitions of human and supernatural capacities in other cosmological systems. In those instances where an officeholder is seen as a source of transformed power, the continued viability of the social system is consistent with his abilities. In addition, a number

of societies considered in the essays, which are representative of others in Africa and elsewhere, more explicitly recognize the fragility of their social universe and suspect, rather than assume, the condition of continued viability. The cultural energy which maintains their social forms is not taken for granted, nor is this attitude unreasonable, in light of a very recent past, experienced with a comparatively simple technology in an often threatening human and natural environment. Members of these societies do not presume that progress is automatic and nature can be altered at will. This is a stance that the West might seek to emulate in our own era of acid rain and global warming. Natural disasters are generally attributed either to the action of human malevolent powers or the failure to take the necessary ritual precautions (Douglas 1966; Karp 1986a). In these circumstances it is necessary to resort to measures that require people with special powers and knowledge.

Communal ceremonies accentuate the themes of renewal in a universe with a constant potential for failure. This entropic view of the cosmos demands a resort to the immanent and personal powers to create and recreate the social conditions of existence. Foucault (1977) remarked that in the West we tend to view power in negative terms. We emphasize its one-dimensional capacity to exclude, repress, subjugate, and censor, while ignoring the possibility of power (from whatever culturally-defined source) to produce and reproduce "objects" and "truth" (p. 194). The societies considered here, by their recognition of the tenuous nature of their existence, place an undisguised emphasis on power as a means to forestall both the demise of extant social arrangements and create new forms of experience and activity. Communal rituals, which aim to convert power from one form to another, are therefore collective expressions of the human imagination. These ritual circumstances seek to establish orderly control over social life (Moore and Myerhoff 1977: 3), but it is possible to recognize even further that in some instances they are concerned with symbolizing the creation of order itself. This is especially apparent in those instances of royal installation or renewal, in which the constituent elements of what is to be society perform their assigned tasks in the creation of successive monarchs who serve as the symbols of their social system.

As the preceding argument suggests, and the following essays document, it is insufficient to conceive of power as many different but unrelated ideas or activities. Nor is it reasonable to divorce the notion of power from its cultural component by reducing it to an abstract feature of social relationships. Admittedly, the idea of power takes on many

forms. However, it also involves indigenous concepts that, through a series of ritual occasions, draw attention to the recognition of particular aspects of cosmology as cultural processes involving not only shifting contexts but also "transformations in experience, identities and action" (Kapferer 1979:3).

Transformation is the key to understanding concepts of power in African societies. A central cultural theme in the essays is that the powers agents have allow them to transform the world. "Transformative capacity" is a key element in people's understanding of power, as much as it is the link between actions and agency in social theory (Giddens 1979). Precisely because our actions have effects on and in the world, we are able to produce form and fashion something out of nature. The concepts of power described in this book are, in effect, theories about the workings of people on nature, in society, and in interaction with other powers."

Underlying much of the ritual and cosmology described in these essays is a sense of power derived from different capacities and used to act on the world. The ideal demonstration of this conclusion would be by means of a systematic survey of the semantics of power in African languages. Problems of translation and the biases inherent in most published dictionaries make that an impossible task. Some evidence is provided in our essays. Among the Iteso the word used to translate "power" is *apedor*, whose primary meaning is ability or capacity. This can be contrasted with *agegong*, meaning physical strength, or in some contexts *abeikin*, meaning to comply, but not having any sense of ability. There is no word for authority and duly constituted government authorities are referred to by some of the words for control. A similar semantic is found among the linguistically related Maasai, for whom *aider* means ability and who separate out physical strength and control (Naomi Kipury, personal communication, 1987). Among the Nilotic Luo the root word for ability is *timo*, which can also mean action. A noun form of *timo*, *tim*, has come to mean culture (E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, personal communication, 1987). The papers in this volume on the Akan-speaking peoples demonstrate a similar semantic structure. Among the Mande-speaking Loma of Liberia, the word for ability is *ghaabaa*, which contrasts with the term for physical strength. *Ghaabaa* enables people to engage in ritual actions such as divination (Robert Leopold, personal communication, 1989).

Once we incorporate semantics, cosmology, and action, power can be understood as something significantly more subtle and meaningful

than sovereignty or domination isolated at one single point in time or place. Rather, it is recognized as a pervasive social resource, which provides the ideological bases for various domestic and public relationships in Africa and elsewhere. This emphasis on the cultural basis of agency does not deny the material base which has been explored in other approaches to the subject. However, it is also necessary to recognize and explore power as a feature of the intriguing and often opaque world of cultural symbols, expressive performances, arcane knowledge, and ambiguous statuses which impart meaning to social action.

Power and agency are themes that can be discerned in much of the literature on African systems of thought. What one of us argued for in an earlier publication holds equally well for this collection of essays:

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. . . . African ideas of power . . . have to do with engaging power and creating or at least containing the world. They may allow for the possibility of transformations in a way that Western social science concepts of power do not (Karp 1986a).

We have divided the essays in this volume into three sections, *Creating Power*, *Forms of Power*, and *Circulating Centers of Power*. As with many collection of this type, the essays in each section could easily have fit into another. Our division emphasizes themes that cut across each author's concerns and which express the cultural forms of the peoples described in the essays.

Section I, *Creating Power*, is directly related to our concern with agency and personhood. The essays describe different powers and effects that actors can produce. They show how power is acquired and examine the dilemmas and nightmares in the imagination of power.

In the first essay, W. Arens describes incest in the installation of the Shilluk *reth*. In this classic case, the violation of a primordial norm is used to create the power of a ritual office. Disorder is put in the service of order. Donald Cosentino's account of Mende stories about Musa Wo explore the "underside" (Karp 1980) of the exercise of power, as does the essay on the Tigray by Dan Bauer. Where Arens shows how the violations of norms create order, Cosentino describes the Mende portrayal of a world in which order becomes impossible and where power rules in its most chaotic and unmanageable form. Arens describes the successful

creation of power, while Cosentino shows how a power's inherent dangers are imagined, as well as how entertaining such danger can be.

Bonnie Wright moves more explicitly to the theme of power, agency, and personhood. Her essay argues that occupational differentiation (commonly called "caste" in West Africa) is based on a cultural theory that distinguishes among the powers held by categories of persons and makes them interdependent. This interdependence affects the exercise of power. Domination by the "nobles" is countered by their dependence on the Griot. Subordination is affected by the powers of speech that only the Griot have but that the nobles require.

No such set of social distinctions affect the exercise of power in Akuropom. There, power can be created by anyone, but only at great personal cost. Michelle Gilbert describes in exquisite detail how power is acquired through the making of a thing, a so-called "fetish". This study demonstrates how cosmology is a resource-in-action that is used to create power. At the same time, she shows that manipulation of categories and things for the purpose of making power overflows the boundaries of the very categories used and becomes a potent source of danger.

Finally, Ivan Karp examines the acquisition of power through affliction. In rites of possession Iteso women become more powerful and act against the sources of jural power. Iteso society is characterized by the jural subordination of women, but this essay clearly shows how jural domination is only one center, and that the creation of power can constitute other, partially opposed, centers. Karp suggests that a clearer awareness of a cultural formation's idioms of power leads to a better understanding of its modes of resistance.

Section II, *Forms of Power*, describes the complex relationships that exist between power and different spheres of activity. Power is not only created and controlled in separate domains, but it acts upon those domains as well. The essays in this section demonstrate the importance of fine grained ethnographic descriptions in accounting for the meaning and exercise of power. In the first essay, Roy Willis describes forms of mutual commensality among the Fipa of Tanzania. Willis shows how domesticity is related to productive relations, which in themselves influence domestic relations. He describes a reticulum of cause and effect in which the changing distribution of power affects the etiquette of everyday life, while the etiquette of everyday life authorizes shifts in power relations.

Ron Engard examines dance and constitutional politics in Bafut. His analysis shows how power is manifested through public ritual and dance, which express duly constituted power. Although much has been written

on art and power in Africa and elsewhere, Engard shows how far-reaching an analysis can be when the understanding of the political system equals the researcher's understanding of the art form.

John Middleton's essay provides a metaphoric choreography of images of power. Middleton describes how Lugbara ritual and symbolic classification orchestrate not only attitudes towards the mystical and practical danger of exercising power, but also the ambiguous attitudes Lugbara hold towards the right to do so. Middleton's concern with ambiguity joins with Michelle Gilbert's demonstration of the ambiguity inherent in the fashioning of a power object.

Aidan Southall takes the most systematically materialist stance in the book. Southall is concerned to situate the idioms of power manifested in rite and symbol in the "necessities" of appropriating nature and social and physical reproduction. His regional perspective takes the *longue durée* to show how systemic potentialities develop over time and space. His analysis may appear to be less concerned with the theme of agency that animates the other articles in the book, since agency tends to disappear as the temporal frame of analysis grows larger. Yet his interest in how identity is constructed shows that Southall is no vulgar determinist. Identity, power, and sanctity are the cultural material neighboring peoples use to construct boundaries between ethnic groups. They are a fundamental source of authority and a means of social reproduction. The papers by Southall and Karp provide interesting parallels. Southall examines the symbolic means by which group identity is reproduced despite their vivid sense of the frailty of the world in which they live. Karp relates spirit possession to the frailty inherent in internal physical and social reproduction. Southall and Karp approach similar problems from two different perspectives: Southall's is the more Olympian point of view, while Karp's is concerned with reproduction in the shortest period of time.

The struggle against the statist bias of social political thought, which has been a central concern of political anthropology from Fortes and Evans-Pritchard to the present, is revived in the final section of our volume. Section III, *Circulating Centers of Power*, attacks the illusion of a centralized authority discussed in the first section of the introduction. The essays in this section make a real advance by showing how social formation are composed of competing epicenters of power whose relative strength may change over different spans of time. These may include not only long-term political change and social transformation, but also the moments in repetitive social processes when duly constituted authorities leave the center stage to the seemingly powerless.

Dan Bauer examines the common cultural resources used by the high-prestige priests and disreputable diviners among the Tigray of high-land Christian Ethiopia. He shows how spatial categories, training, and key symbols are shared among the two, but manipulated differently. Power is derived from the same source although its practitioners act in different arenas and compete with one another. The epicenters in this case share a common culture but compete for scarce resources and status.

Alma Gottlieb explores the "underside" of a duly constituted authority among the Beng. While Bauer's Tigray case shows how low-status figures use the same sources of power as high-status sources, Gottlieb's material reverses this relationship. She demonstrates that the highest Beng authority is perceived as deriving his power from the most illicit source, witchcraft. In this case we have a figure who acts in two epicenters of power that are opposed in ordinary discourse. The theme of ambiguity is also nicely illustrated.

More than any other paper, Victoria Ebin's takes as its theme competition between epicenters of power in an Akan-speaking chiefdom. She shows how power moves between priesthood and chieftancy. For her the most important element is the context of crisis which may produce interdependence when competition is more frequent and normal. Her point is not that social order is reproduced by crisis—although it may be—but rather that power is redistributed because of crisis, and that the sense of a hierarchical ordering of power relations is belied by the background knowledgeable people have of how crises can alter power relations.

Finally, Nancy Fairley takes a historical perspective to competition between competing epicenters of power. Her essay describes the shifts of power that have taken place between secular authorities and secret societies among the Ben'Ekie of Zaire. This paper invokes the contexts of interethnic relations, warfare, and conquest to show how the larger regional arenas can affect the balance among competing centers of power, as well as create new epicenters.

Taken together, the essays in this volume move beyond the identification and description of how power is exercised and acquired in different social settings. The perspective of this volume examines power as an essential element in the cultural resources used to produce structure and action. The essays explore the culturally and historically specific imagery of power more than its exercise or the legitimate basis for its application. This definition of problem has led us to describe such aspects of power relationships as images of generation, systems of transformation, and ideas about the capacities of persons. The organization of power relations

is viewed less as emanating from a center than as shifting among domains at different levels of interaction.

Power is not often manifested in simple or transparent fashion. The following discussions struggle with elaborate and necessarily imprecise images of creativity, domination, and subordination. We see power as an artifact of the creative faculty of the moral imagination.

## Notes

1. Most of the essays were presented at a symposium organized by the editors at the annual meetings of the African Studies Association in 1982. Others were solicited and one is reprinted. We thank Christine Mullen Kreamer and Robert Leopold for their help in preparing the manuscript for publication and Nancy Benco and Benjamin Reiss for skillfully editing so many diverse styles and attitudes into something approaching consistency.

2. The examination of how actions produce effects is a central theme in our essays. As a result, we are also fundamentally concerned with the theme of human agency, a consideration of how action affects people society and nature. This is a concern of much recent thinking in social theory (Karp 1986b). Our essays may provide an instance of the convergence of anthropological thinking and cultural beliefs. We believe that taken as a whole the essays demonstrate that the production of effects and the problems inherent in doing so are a critical theme of the African systems of thought examined here. The idea of paradoxes of agency is examined in Karp 1987.

3. A persistent historical puzzle has been the general neglect of Weber's work by anthropologists, particularly in research on political and legal systems. Beidelman (1966, 1971, 1982) and Fallers (1956) stand out as exceptions in Africanist research. Perhaps one reason for this state of affairs is the perception that Weberian theory applies more to bureaucratic social systems than those he called "patrimonial." This is an error that fails to recognize that Weber's typologies were "ideal," not "real." He formulated them in order to exhibit tendencies in social action, not to describe naturally occurring systems. From a Weberian point of view "real" systems should have elements of more than one ideal-typical system in them. The analytical and historical problem is to demonstrate how these tendencies operate in the production of action. In any of the papers in this volume, for example, a Weberian approach to political systems would be to show not only how epicenters of power charismatically challenge the center, but also to examine whether there are processes of institutionalization and bureaucratization in the epicenter as well as the center.

4. We leave aside for the moment the nineteenth-century mechanistic physics of force and resistance on which it is based. The history of physics in the nineteenth century underwent a conceptual shift yet to appear in the social sciences, in which the definition of "power" moved from force to energy (Elkana 1974). A

number of the papers in the volume, notably Gilbert and Karp, argue that the underlying notion of power in the cultural forms they describe is "energy."

5. Marx (1965) noted this problem when he stated that Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism "elevated the mentality of the English shopkeeper to a universal principle of human behavior."

6. See, for example, such standards as Balandier (1970), Banton (1965), Bailey (1965), Cohen (1974), Gluckman (1965), Swartz (1968), Swartz, Turner and Tuden (1966).

7. This comparison might make an additional test of Goody's conclusions (1977) about the superior storage capacity of the written over the oral word. Comparative research that is internal to social formations is also possible on this topic. One might take a perspective derived from Bakhtin (1984), for example, and show how the "carnivalization" of official culture is an assault using oral cultural forms on the claims of the technology of literacy (Karp 1987).

8. See especially the Introduction to Bloch and Parry (1982), where death rituals are reduced to ideology and then claimed to "deny" the world through their status as a "device for the creation of ideology and political domination" (p. 42). These assertions can only be made by ignoring the "semantic creativity" referred to in the quote by Parkin (1982) above. Underlying them is the assumption that power is universal and the cultural grounds for action examined in the essays in this volume are simply part of the ideological veneer masking differences in the distribution of power.

9. We use the concept of "powers" here much as Lienhardt does in *Divinity and Experience* (1961), as a way of describing supernatural entities whose actions affect the human world.

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