Personhood and Agency
The Experience of Self and Other in African Cultures

Papers Presented at a Symposium on African Folk Models and Their Application, held at Uppsala University, August 23–30, 1987

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Introduction

The essays in this volume were first presented at a symposium on African Folk Models and Their Application, held at Uppsala University in August 1987. All share a common interest in elucidating the dynamics of personhood in traditional African societies, and signal an epistemic shift away from the somewhat static structuralist approaches to the study of personhood characteristic of research during the 1970s. Accounts of cognitive experience are amplified to include lived experience—the world of the senses and emotions, of the body, and of intuition and movement. Of central concern is that aspect of personhood, Mauss (1939) referred to as moi—the awareness of self—as opposed to la personne morale—the ideological definition of personhood in terms of rules, roles and representations. The focus is on idiosyncratic, inner, elusive experiences of the self and not just the outer persona or mask which a person presents to the world (cf. Lienhardt 1985)—"those particular contingencies which make each of us 'I' rather than a copy or replica of somebody else" (Rorty 1989:25).

Cognitive stereotypes about personhood are placed on a par with less explicit, more elusive experiences of self and other which are not always amenable to verbal description or given public approval. The unifying focus is the experience of personhood in all its modalities, and questions concerning the 'essence' or 'identity' of persons are not taken up as fundamental issues, but regarded simply as aspects of the empirical field to be explored. A person's experience in crisis or conflict is accorded the same significance as experiences mediated by conventional conceptualizations of personhood. Bodily and sensory aspects of the Lebenswelt are given as much weight as verbal statements and graphic schemata. And the interplay between the person as a category and the person as a categorizer is elucidated through meticulous empirical research. In this sense, many of these papers may be seen as a continuation of Meyer Fortes' later work, in which he insisted that any enquiry into personhood should give equal value to culturally objectified and subjectively apprehended aspects of social life.

"Thus, from whichever way we approach our enquiry we see how important it is to keep in mind the two aspects of personhood. Looking at it from the objective side, the distinctive qualities, capacities and roles with which society endows a person enable the person to be known to be, and also to show himself to be the person he is supposed to be. Looked at from the subjective side, it is a question of how the individual, as actor, knows himself to be—or not to be—the person he is expected to be in a given situation and
status. The individual is not a passive bearer of personhood; he must appropriate the qualities and capacities, and the norms governing its expression to himself" (Fortes 1973:287).

But the existential orientation of many of these essays does more than bring home to us the importance of studying how people actively and creatively interact with the world into which they are thrown. This focus on agency leads directly to an interest in how people tackle and resolve the crises of quotidian life. And, as we have noted, it entails expanding accounts of concepts of the person to include immediate bodily and sensory modalities of personal and interpersonal experience.

It is in this sense that these essays depart from the interpretive assumptions which underlie many of the essays collected in Dieterlen’s 1973 volume entitled La Notion de Personne en Afrique Noire. At the Uppsala Symposium, participants returned time and again to the variability, multiplicity and negotiability of modes of personhood. Concepts of the person, whether legalistic or normative, seldom cover and contain the full range of a person’s experience. This is what Adorno meant by “negative dialectics”, the non-identity of concepts and the objects or persons to which they refer (Adorno 1967:5). The implication of this observation for an anthropology of the person is that we can never proceed directly from verbal statements or conceptualizations to an understanding of the experience of persons. Put another way, we cannot presume that concepts reflect in an unproblematic way the world they supposedly represent.

One paper presented at the Uppsala Symposium gives us a veritably African view of what this expanded empiricism entails for the anthropology of personhood. In elucidating the character of Oromo thought, Gemetchu Megerssa and Aneesa Kassam showed how the Oromo use the metaphor of the human body to describe three modalities of thinking: within the belly (garaa), in the head (mataa), and in the heart (onne). Abdominal thinking is unifying and harmonizing. Boundaries between self and other, high and low, good and bad, etc. are all dissolved. By contrast, the world of the head is patriarchal and hierarchical, a world of distinction and division. A third modality of thought is associated with the heart. It is prophetic and poetic, inspirational to wide and oracular. Metaphorically feminine, the thinking of the heart gives emphasis to hearth and home, heritage and communitas.

Megerssa and Kassam illustrate the Oromo model by applying it to the conceptualization of trees. In the world of the belly (garaa) trees are seen as equal and analogous to all other life-forms, including persons, objects and animals. In the world of the head (mataa) trees are distinguished in terms of size, sex, ecological situation, practical value, etc. Finally, in the thought-world of the heart (onne), metaphors abound which liken trees to clans of sub-clans among other things, so creating a fund of images which expresses the complementarity of men and women, and of different social groups, and so on.

These three ‘thought-worlds’ together make up what Megerssa and Kassam call “the integral world” in which “all the differences, all the common features of comp...
features, all the dualities and polarities as well as the poetic representations of complementarity are accommodated" (Megerssa and Kassam 1987:17).

It is instructive to apply this Oromo view of the Lebenswelt to the phenomenon of personhood with which we are concerned here. First, by locating thought within the body, the Oromo model avoids the Cartesian split which beggars so much ethnographical description and leads to false antinomies between the rational mind and the disorderly life of the body and the emotions. Second, the Oromo model stresses that our sense of the world and of ourselves is by no means invariant. Sometimes we see ourselves as differentiated and detached from others, at other times we experience ourselves as being at one with others, as well as with trees, animals and things.

Sometimes too, we seem to escape the everyday appearance of thing with metaphors, images and actions which dramatically transform our experience. But the underlying emphasis in the Oromo model is that all these modes of thinking are modalities of experience which must be given equal weight in coming to an understanding of the world. In this respect the Oromo model is reminiscent of what William James called radical empiricism, a philosophical approach to the Lebenswelt that gives equal emphasis to transitive and substantive elements, conjunctions and disjunctions, conceptual schemes and practical, bodily and sensible experience (see Jackson 1989). In his Principles of Psychology, James was at pains to point out that neither a substantialist view of the person (such as Aristotle, Descartes and Locke held) nor a view of the person as a stream of sensations (Hume’s associationalist view) are tenable, since human experience includes both modalities (James 1893:352–353). Only by keeping alive a sense of the always varying, alternating ways in which experience is actually lived can we avoid the epistemological trap of constructing a theory of knowledge out of one aspect or moment of experience and privileging it over all others (James 1976). Quite simply, persons sometimes experience themselves in a Humean way, sometimes in a Lockean way, and sometimes, as in the case of positivist social scientists, as Kantian transcendentalists. But these modalities of experience should not be reified and then debated as competing epistemologies. Rather they should be seen as descriptive of the varying ways human beings experience the world according to widely varying needs and interests.

Anita Jacobson-Widding’s seminal paper on the shadow in Congolese conceptions of personhood addresses quite specifically the dialectical relation between cultural thought-models and lived experience, contrasting ‘cultural’ and ‘experiential’ aspects of personhood in a manner reminiscent of Mauss’s distinction between moï and la personne morale. She argues that in any society, the ideologically privileged conception of personhood always entails a shadowy, unofficial, countervailing set of ideas and experiences, often in-
voked in the liminal moments of myth or intimate conversation. On this subject, George Devereux writes:

"Each culture contains also the negation of its manifest pattern and nuclear values, through a tacit affirmation of contrary latent patterns and marginal values. The complete real pattern of a culture is a product of a functional interplay between officially affirmed and officially negated patterns possessing mass" (Devereux 1967:212).

This counter-normative domain is not merely logically derived. It represents a domain of comparative freedom in which each individual appropriates, negotiates, and reproduces the conventional social order in terms of the exigencies of his or her particular situation as much as in terms of cultural inertia and social habit. Jacobson-Widding shows that the metaphor of the shadow among the peoples of the Lower Congo pertains to this fluctuating, precarious domain of individual experience which underlies the domain of dogma. "The shadow of a person is a perfect symbol of individual identity," she writes, "when this is felt to be elusive". Furthermore, she demonstrates that a bias towards or foregrounding of either the 'sociocentric view' or the 'egocentric view' of the person is an artefact of context. In the case of ethnography, the determinative context is the mode of interaction—interrogative, cinematic, observational, participatory, etc.—that characterizes the ethnographer's fieldwork and lifestyle. The models of personhood foregrounded or favoured in anthropological analysis are often reflective, not just of the culture observed, but of the personality and interests of the observer.

Jacobson-Widding explores the oscillation between formal and informal notions of the person in several contexts. First she shows that although the orderly, rational, 'white' worlds of the matrilinian and of the matrilineal ancestors are contrasted with a shadowy world of witches, sorcerers, and charismatic individuals, this latter domain is not unequivocally dark and negative. In private, many people cultivate strong, if ambiguous, emotional ties with the marginal nkuyu spirits, sometimes identifying their deceased fathers with them. Second, Jacobson-Widding examines notions of body and soul through an exhaustive review of missionary and ethnographic literature on the peoples of the Lower Congo. What interests us here is the way in which formal interviews in public produced an official, sociocentric view of the person as comprising an interior person, associated with matriliny, order and collective identity, and an exterior person symbolized by bodily exuviae, a personal name, and the shadow which was judged to be dark and negative. Informal, intimate conversations, however, tended to bring out a different view of the person, one emphasizing emotions and specific events and more concerned with an individual's power of agency than with static normative generalizations. In this intimate and quasi-clandestine discourse, the metaphor of the shadow recurs—a metaphor, in Jacobson-Widding's view, for individual selfhood and agency. It is not that a person fails to derive a sense of self-worth and identity from belonging to a group, but rather that individuals must feel they have space to play out and express their selfhood in ways they feel are chosen re...
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chosen rather than merely imposed by tradition or inscribed in collective representations. Of course, as Fortes observes (op.cit), this sense of control, command and choice is only occasionally achieved. Fate intervenes, circumstances overwhelm, things fall apart.

This existential problematic is taken up by Michael Jackson in his essay on Kuranko shape-shifting. Jackson begins by elucidating Kuranko conventional wisdom concerning individuals able to transform themselves into animals. He then clarifies the ontological assumptions which gives credibility to these beliefs. First, given the view that the attributes of personhood (morgoye) are distributed into the worlds of ancestors, fetishes, bush spirits, the divine creator and totemic animals, it follows that any one of these categories can act as though endowed with intentionality and will. Second, because totemic animals exemplify the magnanimity and generosity associated with ideal persons, and because human beings and their clan totems are linked by kinship, it is not improbable that this link should sometimes be realized as an actual bodily and sensible experience—that of shape-shifting.

However, not everyone recognizes, let alone actualizes, this ontological possibility, and in seeking to understand why specific individuals become shape-shifters or experience metamorphosis into animal form, it is necessary to consider individual biographies and life experiences. This Jackson does by discussing at length his relationship with a man who could allegedly transform himself into an elephant. Detailing the recurrent crises in this man’s life, Jackson argues that shape-shifting is one way in which a person can regain or augment a sense of flagging power and personal inadequacy. The ambivalence which Kuranko feel toward shape-shifters may be compared to the ambivalent character of the shadow, discussed by Jacobson-Widding, because shape-shifting is both an extraordinary assertion of individual powers in terms which belong to the bush rather than the community, and also an oblique proof of the bond between each individual and his or her totemic animal. Creating some kind of balance between the vital but unruly energies associated with the bush and the orderly world of the village is thus a refrac-

tion of a deeper need to adjust individual freedom to its limiting conditions, to reconcile the established order of tradition with the exigencies of concrete situations and the idiosyncratic demands which each individual places upon them.

In stressing the way in which beliefs vary from context to context both in the way they are used and the conviction with which they are held, Jackson pays tribute to the work of Devereux and James, both of whom emphasized the role of crisis in bringing beliefs out of ‘cold storage’ and transforming them from passively accepted premises about the world to active and creative coping strategies. Showing how beliefs quite unlike our own are taken up and used in dealing with the exigencies of everyday life thus entails a demystifica-

tion. As we come to appreciate the existential similarities of problems such as powerlessness and precariousness in a variety of cultural settings, our tendency to regard ostensibly different beliefs as evidence of radically differ-
ent modes of thought and experience is countermanded. In other words, Jackson advocates an instrumentalist view of truth, which locates the meaning of a belief not in its pretension to mirror a so-called external world nor in the way it fits into some supposedly static ‘system’ of beliefs, but in how it carries people into relation with the world and with others, transforming their experience, helping them cope with existence.

This existential concept of power, which emphasizes mastery of self rather than world mastery, is one of the recurrent motifs in studies of spirit possession. In his paper on Iteso spirit possession, Ivan Karp points out that it is part of the received wisdom of anthropology to regard spirit possession as a symptom or sign of social powerlessness, a means by which those who cannot control the world by normal, secular means, manipulate their own body-worlds or induce altered states of consciousness to give themselves some sense of mastery or power. But, Karp observes, such interpretations entail a paradox, for how can a person be dispossessed by another, yet still act as an agent, producing his or her own actions? Furthermore, if possession is a manifestation of a person’s socio-political powerlessness, what significance are we prepared to attach to the meanings ascribed to possession by the actors themselves? Here Karp is particularly concerned to elucidate notions of power articulated in the actual societies in which possession is found.

He begins with Grace Harris’s study of female possession among the Taita of Kenya. Harris emphasizes the way in which conflict between men and women over control of women’s bodies and labour is played out in bodily terms. It is in the ‘struggle between self and possessing spirit for control over body and personality’ that Karp finds the clue to understanding possession. But to what extent does the Eurocentric, Enlightenment notion of power as world-mastery help us understand what goes on in African spirit possession? Karp’s answer is to pay close attention to indigenous African exegesis, an approach which leads him to a view not unlike that of Michel Foucault—that power is not merely a form of domination or repression; it is also a generative capacity. This brings Karp to a consideration of the African metaphor of the bush as simultaneously a domain of dangerous powers and of vital energies without which the very existence of human communities is placed in jeopardy. Like the shadow, the bush signifies the generative powers of persons as individual agents. Thus, possession by spirits of the dead occupying the wild is one vital conduit to the fecund potentialities of the natural world, a dramatic and bodily enactment of the ongoing struggle of human beings to tap and command the often dangerous powers of the wild and make them serve the common weal. But this periodic revitalization of the social order, played out in farming as well as ritual, also involves a crucial existential transformation for every individual woman who comes through the possession experience. Like men, they have gained active mastery, but as women they also exemplify the capacity for procreation and growth.

They do so through what Karp in another context has described as a ‘paradox of agency’ (1988). In cults of possession, Iteso women are relieved of the responsibility of generating the events defining the move ‘deep act on behalf of women to The paradox of possession.

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of the responsibilities of marriage as they become ‘married’ to spirits. They free themselves from the subordination they experience in marriage by subordinating their bodies to spirits, who they may then come to dominate as they move ‘deeper’ into their cults. By becoming agents for themselves they also act on behalf of spirits. An initial loss of autonomy is thus a precondition for women to regain control over their lives.

The paradox of agency is also evident in the antinomy between the celebration of conjugal sexuality as a way of dealing with death and disorder and the dependence of women on their husbands in Susan Reynolds Whyte’s essay. Among the Marachi (a sub-group of the Luyia in Western Kenya), procreative sexuality is a powerful image of orderly social relations and of social continuity. Extramarital sex connotes exactly the reverse. There is therefore an oblique relationship between bereavement and marital infidelity, since both events disrupt the orderly pattern of life and threaten social continuity. The recreation of social order entails a ritual reaffirmation of conjugal bonds and procreative sexuality. In Marachi this finds expression in a dream which every widow is expected to have before her period of quarantine can end: she must dream of having sex with her late husband. Reynolds Whyte argues that this dream is a test of a widow’s fidelity, a sign that she has neither had nor entertained the idea of sex with any other man. It thus affirms conjugality (which is also commemorated by her wearing her dead husband’s clothes during the period of her quarantine) and clears the way for her re-entry into society, signified by remarriage. But betwixt and between these two moments of social time is a liminal period, marked by the suspension and dissolution of social ties, the isolation of the widow, and symbolized by the notion of illegitimate sexuality—one of the most potent of all threats to social harmony. As Reynolds Whyte observes, “the positive cleansing character of conjugal sex depends upon the cultural construction and elaboration of its opposite—dangerous mixing of the wrong categories of people”. While adultery and anomalous marriages are, like ‘bad’ deaths (suicide, homicide, a widow dying before remarriage, a girl dying before payment of bridewealth), manifestations of disorder and the focus of considerable anxiety, conjugal intercourse is “the essence of order—that which can purify even death.”

Towards the end of her paper, Reynolds Whyte asks what the widow’s dream tells us about concepts of personhood in Western Kenya. Here her emphasis is on the metaphorical connections recognized between the human body and individual and social identity. Since death involves a radical transformation of the body, it automatically evokes critical questioning about the identity of persons and the integrity of the social body. Burial and the transition to ancestorhood as well as the analogous processes of bereavement and the remarriage of widows thus become the subjects of social interest and ritual action for the community as a whole. These events and processes enable people to objectify their collective ideals and act in concert to restore the sense of order that has been lost by the death of an individual person.

But if the body is central to this discourse and activity, it is not the body
as Mary Douglas is inclined to describe it—a passive object, reflecting a reified social order. Rather it is the body of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology—lived as an intentionality. Reynolds Whyte refers to Rene Devisch's study (1984) of semantic manipulation in gynaecological rituals of self-recreation (*khita*) among the Yaka of southwestern Zaire to underscore this point. Through the lived body, people actively create and recreate a sense of themselves as integral members of a community. Like Ivan Karp, Susan Reynolds Whyte favours a view of agency that construes power less as a way of controlling resources and others through repressive ordinances and actions than as a semantic and bodily capacity for generating and regenerating the world. Procreative sexuality assumes especial significance here, since it is at once the most potent and most mundane expression of this praxis, just as death is the most obvious negation of it. Since women are the foci of procreative sexuality it is understandable that in those societies described by Reynolds Whyte, women should both be the foci of anxiety when there is a death and be the principal agents whereby a community reconstitutes itself in the face of death. But there is a gender complementarity here which Reynolds Whyte is careful to emphasize. The pressure on women to remain faithful and circumspect may be far greater than it is for men, but in the end it is only by men and women acting together that the social order can be created and recreated. Conjugal sexuality is thus a capacity and resource, emphasized "not only at death but in many other contexts . . . as the principle of order in human existence." Marachi women do not see the regulations surrounding sex and death as imposed by men. Men are also bound by various obligations. But most important, marriage brings order to the worlds of men and women alike, "and conjugal sex is a joint enterprise—not an achievement of men alone. A husband and wife together create order . . ."

Rene Devisch's paper on the human body as a vehicle of emotions among the Yaka of southwestern Zaire exemplifies the importance of understanding personhood not just in semantic or conceptual terms but in terms of bodily and affective life. Devisch's emphasis on the 'lived body' and on sensory codifications helps us understand social interaction and meaning as mediated by emotions and bodily actions, not just by words and things.

Here as elsewhere, Devisch is concerned with the dynamic and transformative capacities of semantic codes. His is an ethnography of lived dramas, not static grammars, and of the metaphorical interweaving of social, cosmological and bodily worlds whereby people create a sense of themselves and of community.

Devisch begins with a description of Yaka dancing which evokes the kinesthetic experience involved. This, he notes, is essentially an experience of the life-force (*m-mooyi*) flowing through and among the dancers. It is a sensuous and lustful celebration of the power of sexuality to create social life as well as recreate it in the face of death, disease and disorder. Dance is thus metaphorical in character, creating links between the vital energy of the individual body, the social body, and the cosmos. The details of how these links are forged suggest their cyclical nature. Women's smell is a metaphor for ordination of senses (social fi in the realm of the social field, the cigarette-smoke of metaphors distributed throughout the body itself as a network of olfactory fibres be which pe a single .

Devisch's analysis of the Yaka's conception of the body as a vehicle of emotions is significant for understanding the dynamic and transformative capacities of semantic codes. His work exemplifies the importance of understanding personhood not just in semantic or conceptual terms but in terms of bodily and affective life. Devisch's emphasis on the 'lived body' and on sensory codifications helps us understand social interaction and meaning as mediated by emotions and bodily actions, not just by words and things.
are forged are fascinating. For instance, the rhythmic rotation of hip and belly suggests to the Yaka the concentric movement of women as they go about their cycle of daily tasks: fetching water, fishing, tilling fields, collecting food. Women’s dancing is, moreover, a metaphorical form of weaving which is itself a metaphor for the birth and regeneration of the world—the sap rising in the raffia palm being compared to the sun rising in the sky from the womb of the earth, and the movement of the weaving-hook among the raffia palm fibres being compared to the act of sexual intercourse. The sense of oneness which people get through dancing together is thus a corollary of the way in which personal, social and cosmological fields of meaning are brought into a single all-encompassing frame of reference.

Devisch has pioneered research into the way in which the five senses are attributed different values and emphases in different societies. For the Yaka, smell is privileged over the other senses as a metaphor for intimacy and communion. Things that smell good have the power to bring about the conjunction of self, society and cosmos. Conjugal union is understood as a form of olfactory exchange, or olfactory empathy, and the gift of strong smelling cigarettes may thus act as kind of love-magic. By contrast, bad smell is a metaphor for disorder and pollution, and conjugal disharmony may be attributed to ‘irreconcilable bodily odours’.

Metaphors such as weaving, smell, and hunting, precisely because they are so overdetermined—referring simultaneously to personal, social and cosmic fields of Being—are singularly meaningful and useful whenever one wants to cross the boundaries between these fields of Being and renegotiate the connections between individual, social and cosmic domains. As Devisch notes, the great healing cults of the Yaka “give form to a symbolic rebirth of the patient (corporeal field) in congruence with a revitalization of the (re)generative processes (ngoongu) in the wider life-world (cosmological field) and society (social field)”.

But it is not simply that the metaphor of, say, hunting helps a healer objectify his praxis by likening it to a process of tracking down and trapping the evil which is afflicting his patient. As a metaphor shared equally by the patient, the doctor and the community as a whole, hunting enables everyone to participate in the healing process. An individual’s affliction becomes therefore an occasion for a collective reaffirmation of social ties. And, because the metaphor also has cosmological associations it refers everyone to the cosmological domain as well. The power of metaphor thus lies in the connections it affirms as well as the participatory praxis it enables.

The Yaka conception of the person is understandably one which places or locates the individual within a far-reaching spatial and temporal field. Accordingly, body boundaries are not fixed and a person’s affective ties or identifications with others are thought of as modes of shared bodiliness. Images of commensality and sexual intercourse, of olfactory exchange and touch are given prominence because of their power to generate a sense of community through the dissolution of boundaries between self and other. But there are
other contexts when differentiation and individuation are emphasized, and here, Devisch notes, other metaphors such as vision and supervision come into play. This suggests to Devisch that different sensory emphases are constitutive of different modes of Being-in-the-world. Gaze distances self from other, subject from object, and fosters a sense of personal substantiality and discreteness. Smell and touch diffuse a person’s sense of distinction, promoting fellow-feeling and oneness rather than ‘vertical reciprocity’.

Richard Werbner’s approach to ‘cultural bias’ is somewhat different from Devisch’s. But his is a different problematic. While Devisch approaches social praxis through the lived experience of people working through crises by means of cosmology and metaphor, Werbner takes a more detached view and compares the cosmological systems of two neighbouring peoples of Southern Africa—the Kalanga and the Northern Tswapong—in terms of differences in social structure.

Werbner begins by casting doubt on the usefulness of Mary Douglas’s Group/Grid typology for his purposes. First, the typology does not help one understand the significance both Kalanga and Northern Tswapong attach to personal and cosmic locatedness. Second, while there are no clear differences between the two peoples in terms of Mary Douglas’s Group/Grid model, the unitarian, self-replicating bias of Northern Tswapong culture stands in clear contrast to the pluralist and contrapuntal bias of Kalanga culture and requires elucidation.

Werbner proceeds to show how this contrast pervades all aspects of the social life of these peoples. In the home universe of the Northern Tswapong, the sacred centre is the village, and political and religious authority are concentrated here. This concentric social pattern is replicated in the cosmology. A home universe at any level of description is “a nesting of microcosms within microcosms; the bounded world replicates itself repeatedly, in nesting relations, around centres of greater or lesser importance.” The macrocosm outside this inwardly-focused, self-contained home universe is without a centre. Movement outward across boundaries is always dangerous, a threat to the integrity of the centre. For the Kalanga, by contrast, the home universe has many centres within both the microcosm and the macrocosm. Movement between each domain is readily undertaken, since the outside world is seen as complementary to the world within.

Werbner shows that these differences or ‘cultural biases’ exist as much in the spheres of local authority, marriage and exchange as at the level of cosmology where, for the Tswapong, God is one, while for the Kalanga, God is a trinity of aspects or manifestations.

The problem of boundedness, which Werbner explores from the point of view of comparative sociology, can also be approached phenomenologically. This Jan Ovesen does in his essay on the Lobi of Burkina Faso.

Initiation implies boundary-crossing and a transformation in the experience of self. This is the key to understanding why initiation is paradigmatic of almost all ritual activity among the Lobi.
Ovesen first describes three kinds of collective initiation rites, and presents ethnographic accounts of 'purification' rites—which take place after a homicide, the killing of a big-game animal, and after a person has touched a corpse—which the Lobi also think of as initiations. He observes that in each of these rituals, sacrifices are made to fetishes (tila), and a long-standing relationship between persons and fetishes thereby established. The rites are all initiations because through them individuals acquire knowledge and skills from the fetish world, a process which involves a radical transformation of a person's social status. Those Lobi rituals which are not regarded as initiatory, such as funerals, purification after adultery and the prevention of rebirth do not, Ovesen notes, involve continuing relationships with fetishes or any change in a person's understanding.

Among the Lobi, the world of fetishes is analogous to the human world; it provides an 'objective correlative' of it. Any change in a person's fortune or status entails addressing the fetish world, a penumbral world which Westerners might call the world of the unconscious, signifying processes and influences which lie just outside the reach of human understanding and control. But the fetish world offers not only an objectification of the refractory and hidden forces which bear upon human destiny. Because people can address and interact with fetishes through sacrifice and exchange, the fetishes serve as means whereby the Lobi construct and control their world. Through the fetish world the perplexities of the human condition become not only thinkable but graspable. Fetishes assist people in coming to terms with the troubling and indeterminate relationship between their socio-cultural identity on the one hand, and the vicissitudes of existence and the variousness of human experience on the other. As metaphors bridging the gap between the established social order and the penumbral world of individual experience and 'natural' energy—Lobi fetishes are situated midway between bush and village—the allegorical terms with which African thought is objectified and ritual praxis grounded.

In his classical work on the Fulani of Burkina Faso, Freedom in Fulani Social Life (1977), Paul Riesman noted that the bush is also a metaphor for solitude, freedom, and individuation. Adjusting the impulses of the 'bush' to the imperatives of the 'village' constitutes the central dynamic of Fulani social existence. In his essay on personality formation among the Fulani, Riesman examines one particular dimension of this dynamic—parenting practices.

His approach is ethnopsychological—an attempt to understand Fulani child-rearing practices in Fulani terms, utilizing their concepts, recounting their views. But this elucidation of Fulani ethnopsychology, Riesman observes, inevitably entails an exploration of Fulani ontology and worldview. To the critic who might label Fulani ethnopsychology 'unscientific', Riesman answers in a pragmatist vein that Fulani practices should be evaluated in terms of their consequences, not measured against some ahistorical epistemological standard. Moreover, studying ideas and practices in other cultures offers us a critique of our own often taken-for-granted ideas and practices.
Riesman describes in some detail the love, care and support Fulani parents give to their children. Children are not abused, denied or punished—a pattern of parenting which Riesman sees as exemplary. At the beginning of his fieldwork, Riesman’s attempt to understand Fulani patterns of child-care began with a typically Western question: what is the role of parents in the enculturation of their children? It quickly became apparent, however, that Fulani parents did not see their role in these terms at all. In fact, the idea that parental behaviour shapes a child’s character was foreign to them. A child’s character comes from God. It is ‘given’ rather than shaped by culture or learning. Thus, although a child could imbibe badness with its mother’s milk, a mother’s behaviour per se could not make a child bad.

How then, Riesman asks, can Fulani parenting be so good when they categorically deny that good parenting has anything to do with how a child turns out as an adult? And how is it possible for Fulani children to grow up resourceful and self-disciplined when parents steadfastly avoid forcing or obliging their children to do anything they do not want to do?

Riesman approaches these questions in an interesting way. He suggests that American parents tend to live too much through their children, and regard any bad behaviour in the child as reflecting badly on themselves. This implies a denial of the child’s freedom to be other than an expression and extension of its parents. And it creates anxieties in parents which simply do not exist among the Fulani. Moreover, the intense identification with one’s own children in America limits the extent to which a parent can identify with other children. Among the Fulani, there is not the same hard and fast distinction made between one’s own children and the children of others. The ontological emphasis is that all come from God—an objectification in the Durkheimian sense of the social world as a whole—rather than that each one is separated by the particular identities and influences of its parents.

None of this implies that Fulani are irresponsible parents. In the first place, the insignificance of parental influence in the Fulani worldview does not imply an absence or neglect of care in everyday practical life. Second, Fulani are fully aware that etiquette and social understanding are acquired from others, either through explicit teaching, or what Mauss called “prestigious imitation.” It is just that the Fulani avoid trying to train or shape a child’s behaviour at a tender age when a child is, by definition, unable to possess social understanding or exercise self-control.

What Riesman seems to suggest is that Fulani notions of child-rearing are not to be read as reflections of actual social praxis, but as ways of articulating an ethic of personhood which emphasizes every individual’s belonging to a community rather than his or her relationship to specific parents. In characterizing the differences between Western and Fulani psychologies, he therefore contrasts our emphasis on individual autonomy and identity with the Fulani emphasis on the way each person participates in far-reaching networks of relationship. Episteme is, however, not necessarily congruent with experience. Thus, Riesman observes that though in the West we often believe
Introduction

When they sow a child to grow up forcing or nurturing of his child-care pattern of his child's milk, a child's care or learner's milk, a woman's view that people to be individual skin-encapsulated entities, our exploration of different African worldviews reminds us that our experience of life belies such a view. The same discrepancy or tension between episteme and experience obtains in African societies too, as Jacobson-Widding's essay on the shadow and Riesman's analysis of the village/bush dichotomy among the Fulani (1977:245-257) clearly show. Worldviews which stress the ontological priority of the collectivity do not preclude the countervailing experience of biographical uniqueness.

III

In drawing conclusions and discerning new directions from these essays, let us begin with Paul Riesman's review (1986) of studies of the person and the life cycle in African social life and thought. Riesman echoes the view implicit in many of the essays in this volume, that "our understanding of the self—whether in general or in any particular culture—is severely limited without the aid of a phenomenological perspective" (Riesman 1986:88).

This emphasis on studying personhood through modes of self-consciousness also entails a praxaeological perspective—an interest not only in how people construct meaning in social life, but in how people use and negotiate those meanings in action and interaction. Many of the essays we have reviewed here convey "a sense, albeit imperfect, of how life is experienced and lived from within the mind of a person" and demonstrate "that to view culture as acting on a person is too simplistic. We cannot any longer take for granted that we know why a person is doing something when his actions happen to coincide with the 'dictates' of his culture" (Riesman, op.cit.:91).

This focus on the person as both conditioned by culture and acting purposively with others to make a meaningful and viable world implies that the metaphors people use are not to be interpreted as evidence of far-fetched, essentially disparate worldviews, but as modes of objectification which provide people with the means to address and deal with the adversities of everyday social life, many of which are common to people in all human societies: the betrayal of friends, the dissolution of a marriage, a death in the family, disappointment, illness, penury, and homelessness.

This view is symptomatic of the resistance of many of the ethnographers represented in this volume to assuming a detached objectivist point of view. On the theoretical side, this implies a skeptical attitude to questions of personal identity, especially if that identity is assumed to reside, ready-made as it were, in roles, rules and representations of personhood. The emphasis is not on the centred subject but on the experience of the subject in its various modalities and in a variety of settings. What many of these essays argue is that Africans and Europeans alike experience a tension between the way the world appears in its givenness or facticity and the way one wants it to be. It is in moments of crisis, when the routines of ordinary life are held in abeyance,
that people most dramatically bring into focus and negotiate a sense of meaning for their lives. Thus, Karp shows that by imaging relations with possessing spirits as marriage relations Iteso women bring into critical relief attitudes towards domesticity and child-bearing, Jackson shows how tacit notions of Kuranko personhood are spelled out when an individual undergoes transformation into a totemic animal, and Reynolds Whyte shows how bereavement among the Marachi engenders reflection upon the nature of procreative sexuality. Meaning is projective. It issues out of the purposeful activity whereby men and women, alone and in concert, adjust their lives to the conditions under which those lives are in the first place possible. In this process of adjustment and coping, there are always faculties which are frustrated, hopes dashed, and expectations confounded. Personal fulfillment, like social structure, can neither be practically realized nor permanently found in the quotidian world. Just as on the sociological plane one can only speak of the process of structuring, not of finished structures (Piaget 1971), so on the existential plane one can only speak of the struggle to make sense of the world and cope with its recurrent contingencies.

Methodologically, the reluctance to draw hard and fast existential distinctions between Africa and the West leads to an emphasis on participation and empathy as well as a willingness to disclose in the very form of one's writing the circumstances under which one's understanding of self and other emerges. Many of the authors in this volume (Jackson, Karp, Riesman, Devisch) seek to demystify the seeming otherness of African worldviews and ritual praxis and at the same time offer explicit critiques of modes of understanding foregrounded in Western academic discourses.

There is also an implicit relationship, which it is the ethnographer's task to clarify, between the kind of understanding reached of another culture and the methods and modes of interaction that characterize the ethnographer's sojourn in that culture. Riesman argues this case strongly (1986:94), and it is reiterated by Jacobson-Widding, Jackson, Devisch, Reynolds Whyte, and Ovesen.

The relationship between praxis and knowledge, experience and episteme is, however, indeterminate. This is why so many of the ethnographers here are loath to derive an understanding of personal experience directly from dogmas or concepts of personhood. Formalized notions of personhood are not to be construed as descriptive of a static, preordained, social world; they are instrumentality which people actively use in constructing and reconstructing a world which adjusts values and goals inherited from the past to the problems and exigencies which comprise their social existence in the here and now.

This sense of life as problematic informs many of these essays. Words and concepts do not cover the world; nor do all the causes and influences that bear upon our experience become visible to us or enter our grasp. The image of the shadow, as elucidated by Jacobson-Widding, defines this penumbral region which our cultural conditioning disposes us to see as intrapsychic, as the 'unconscious', but which in Africa is articulated by metaphors of hidden places and of clandestine bush is i and age reproducethem. N his or h 'found' agency—with got cope wit pacity at and untually th which th remind u depends sons. U regions, to the el grasp th those el grounds

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Jackson, M. 1989. Paths Toward a Clearing: and of the bush. The bush signifies the shadowy world of sorcery and clandestine action as well as the domain of 'wild' energies. In these senses, the bush is inimical to the social order. But the bush also stands for individuality and agency—the capacities of human beings to do more than inertly reproduce in their individual lives the world into which circumstances cast them. No one makes the world from nothing or escapes the contingencies of his or her birth, upbringing and culture. But each person strives to live the 'found' world as though it were of his or her own making. Metaphors of agency—which are found in all societies, even if they are sometimes associated with gods and spirits rather than persons—are thus means whereby people cope with the world by denying contingency. African metaphors of human capacity and praxis commonly refer us to the bush—a domain of vital resources and untrammeled energies seemingly external to the given social order but actually deep within it: the power of individual will and intelligence without which the collectivity would cease to be viable. To evoke the bush is thus to remind ourselves that the integrity and perpetuation of every collective order depends in the last analysis on the initiatives and actions of individual persons. Unless our ethnographies convey some sense of these penumbral regions, they will be inadequate as accounts of African reality as well as false to the character of our own understanding which, while reaching outward to grasp the visible forms of an alien cultural landscape, often leaves unexplored those elusively universal aspects of human experience which are the very grounds on which the possibility of the anthropological project rests.


To what extent do errors affect our logical presentation of the information? For, in this context with different emotions, these two social corners distinguish one hand these two fundamental feelings. In African meaningful communities publicly, and an impression in discourse has been made. In the Congo, the image is fairly secure in the London to convey feelings rather than substituted.

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