

**Moral
Imagination
in
Kaguru
Modes of
Thought**

T. O. Beidelman

With a new foreword by Ivan Karp

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Foreword

. . . negative capability—that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

John Keats

Is it possible to write an ethnography that shows how people's beliefs and values form an internally consistent system and at the same time demonstrate that this system creates the possibility for subversion? Can an ethnography of the imagination begin with an analysis of individuals enmeshed in the give-and-take of everyday life? Is it possible to write about representations and provide an account of the fundamentally political nature of the imaginative life? Can morality be explored primarily through negative examples? These are the questions posed by this powerful and innovative study of social categories, imaginative constructions, and pervasive conflicts in the life of the Kaguru people of Tanzania.

T. O. Beidelman's prize-winning book has been widely acclaimed as a mature work of ethnographic analysis that follows more than three decades of study and reflection on the social life of a Tanzanian people. Its focus is the ethnography of the imagination, defined as a set of mental activities involving fantasy and speculation, including reflections about fate and about life in a society in which there is a massive gap between what people desire and what they experience. Social experience lies at the core of imaginative life, particularly the many ways in which people relate to one another, compete and cooperate, strive to achieve their goals, and continuously adjust their strategic and symbolic interactions to changing circumstances.

Despite its attention to how people strive toward their goals, this is not a book about individuals in the commonsense way we customarily think about them. Named persons do not fill the pages, as they do in so many recent works of anthropology. Neither is this book about depersonalized, abstract categories, disengaged from the life world. This study dwells somewhere in between the known personality and the shared systems that social scientists call culture.

Beidelman's subject is the *moral* imagination, that set of ideas, images, and practices through which people reflect on the nature of life in society and dream about escaping it. Just whose moral imagination—subjects' or author's—forms the subject of this book is appropriately ambiguous. *The Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought* begins with a discussion of ideas about the imagination found primarily in works devoted to interpreting literature and philosophy. It ends with a meditation on the sources of Beidelman's own moral imagination as they manifested themselves in his life's history.

Between the theory and the personal reflections, Beidelman tells stories about the Kaguru. He follows customary anthropological practice by setting

his account in terms of neighboring peoples, local history, environment, economy, and social organization. Yet this is no conventional ethnography. The cultural forms and complex relations Kaguru devise and through which they interact with one another are the social matrix out of which their moral judgments and imaginative life emerge. What we derive from reading this work, as well as Beidelman's many other books and articles, is a *feel* for the complex and frequently unsatisfactory decisions that the Kaguru make on a daily basis.

This is an ethnography whose themes both revolve around and reflect one another. As such it does not make for an easy work to read. Self-reflection (by Kaguru and the ethnographer) blends into an analysis of symbolic classification: The associations of right and left are related to moral judgments. Folktales about hyena and hare are connected to uncontrolled aggression, domination, and ideas about sociability. Perhaps the complex layerings of theme, imaginative constructions, and life experience are the features that appeal to African scholars who have reviewed this work and been struck by its, dare I say it, authenticity.

Yet this observation creates still another ambiguity. Can a book that is so relentlessly skeptical about all claims of knowledge, including the author's, be termed authentic? These are not questions that have answers, and Beidelman does not provide many easy answers in his book. What we expect from a work of social science is analysis. Kaguru life should be broken down into its constitutive elements, and analysts should show how the elements are connected. They should adduce principles that generate the patterns they describe for us. Even a work of interpretive ethnography, such as this, generally strives for some sort of analysis of patterns. But even though there is much analysis as well as plenty of assertions about pattern in this work, somehow each chapter subverts the preceding one.

Take the central part of the book. In succession Beidelman describes cosmology and dualism; moral space; the house; settlements and body etiquette; legendary time; clans and ethnicity; personhood and time; seasons; names and omens. Each of these chapters covers a conventional ethnographic topic but manages to combine materials that have elsewhere only been treated separately, such as the house and body etiquette or seasons and names. He shows how these are connected through principles that organize Kaguru imaginative constructions, and how vital connections among them are derived not only from their cognitive relationship but through the practice and experiences of the Kaguru themselves.

In the chapter on moral space, Beidelman establishes that houses and settlements are major settings that are organized in terms of fundamental moral ideas about types of persons and how they should relate to one another. This sort of analysis is familiar from the literature on symbolic classification. But Beidelman transcends this type of analysis by looking at moral space as a "stage" on which protagonists enact and debate ideas about what is proper and good for one another. Even here, however, he subverts his own point. The idea of a stage suggests both role playing and improvisation, that somehow a narrative is enacted and a conclusion reached. This further suggests that the

negotiation of ideas and practices which Beidelman describes are concluded on stage. But Beidelman reverses his own account in a fascinating materialist way. He argues that the very same stages which serve as moral spaces are also settings in which the most fundamental acts ensuring survival and reproduction are played out:

Kaguru hold formal beliefs and symbolic terms of expression, but how these are interpreted depends upon the occasions and the protagonists involved. This indeterminacy is essential in that it draws Kaguru into continued negotiations as to which tones and meanings will be stressed at various encounters, and what they will mean. . . . What remains pervasive and unnegotiated is the tenor of everyday activities, Kaguru modes of work, cooking, alimentation, play, grooming and sexuality. These routines are molded not only by etiquette and habit but by the very forms of Kaguru settlements, housing and landscape. (P. 64)

Thus the very settings in which symbolic forms are produced are also settings in which the limits of negotiability are experienced. Material constraints, the limits produced by past actions, the materiality of human actions themselves as they produce a "natural" world shaped by human hands and human history are the limits of the world in which the Kaguru, and not only the Kaguru, act.

For all of its dependence on a language-game concept of culture, Beidelman's book does not conform to Wittgenstein's famous aphorism that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world." Instead Beidelman asserts over and over again that "my language bumps up against the changing limits of the world." This realist position is linked to the contents of this book in a challenging way. The conventional materialist approach is content to show how symbolic activity is limited by social and natural content. Beidelman does something remarkably different. He focuses on the experience of limits themselves and on how attempts at transcending the physical, social, and moral conditions of existence are the stuff out of which the moral imagination is made.

"Imagination is an art by which individuals struggle to transform their social baggage into gear that suits urgent situational needs in terms of meanings and moral judgments" (p. 203). This gear is designed to answer the great questions of culture and philosophy, defined in the broadest sense. Identity, fate, distributive justice are all brought into play in the moral imagination. Play is a significant aspect of the continuous process by which imaginative constructions are made and remade, answers to momentous questions are formulated and rejected, but play is a serious matter for the Kaguru, even when it is physical.

Derived from the experience of limits, conflict, domination, and loss, the moral imagination plays upon what Beidelman calls the quotidian aspects of life. Possibility and potentiality are imaginatively elaborated upon the fabric of daily life while leaving lived experience unchanged. Changing society asks too much of the imagination, but the very play of the imagination so well

described in this book does produce the possibility of questioning, maybe even challenging the naturalness of everyday life, of the limits of the material and natural worlds.

Because he deals with both social activities and imaginative constructions, the organization and chapter headings of *Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought* cover the standard fare of many other ethnographies. Beidelman describes environment and social organization, symbolic classification, concepts of time and space, storytelling, ideas about pollution and cleanliness, notions of sociability, witchcraft and sorcery beliefs, and more besides. These are the usual materials found in a monograph on modes of thought. Yet in Beidelman's hands these materials take on new and subtle shades of meaning.

Not only limits but ambiguity and subversion are recurrent topics that run through Beidelman's seemingly conventional accounts of symbolic classification, ideas about time and space, attitudes toward the life cycle and human body, and notions about kinship and personhood. All are forms through which society is constructed and media by which people pursue their goals. The emphasis on practice found in so much current anthropological writing also covers these topics in much the same ways.

This work deviates from more conventional ethnographies by focusing on how people subvert expectations, fail to conform, or simply fail in their aims. It is not an ethnography of Kaguru successes and public recognition. I think that all ethnographies implicitly advocate a point of view and identify with some members of a society at the expense of others. Most ethnographic accounts, certainly most Africanist ethnographies, ally themselves with the more successful members of society, such as elders, government chiefs, and women who have achieved senior status. Studies of African societies are replete with marriages completed, households formed, lives honored, and children brought into the world and successfully reared, as well as rituals that achieve their goals.

The Kaguru with whom Beidelman identifies are another sort. This is a book of lives blighted by witchcraft, political plans gone askew, houses sundered, and children ill. Nonetheless, the people who are described herein have a splendid and defiant aspect to them. The gaps between goals and ideals and their experience of disjuncture in the life world is filled by the Kaguru with an extraordinary rich and evocative imaginative life. In the Kaguru world, space and time are organized in terms of complex categories; subtle differences in the life course are the subject of meditation, and pleasure is taken not only in worldly success but also in how people pursue their aims.

Now I do not want to suggest that the Kaguru people in Beidelman's perspective are characters out of a Hemingway novel, playing a game they know is lost simply for the sake of playing it. The Kaguru world is filled with far more uncertainty and indeterminacy than Hemingway's. The Kaguru people are not Italian counts playing billiards but African peasants subject to the vicissitudes of environment, invasion by outsiders, and problems of their own making. "To imagine another kind of world is always a judgment about this one," Beidelman tells us (p. 202). Performed as mock judgment or serious judgment, the moral imagination simultaneously links and releases individuals

from their social and material circumstances. This is perhaps the most profound observation made by Beidelman in this book. He continually returns to the theme of imaginative freedom and responsibility. The Kaguru people are perpetually in flight from one another, in his view, as they struggle to hold others to them. This contradictory attitude relates to the ways in which their imaginative constructions reflect on and enlarge their world. The options that Kaguru imagine conform only partially to the options available to them in this world. In a way they free themselves from their limits by imagining how those limits may be transcended, even when that is patently impossible. The judgments they make about the world by imagining alternatives create the possibility of more than the world offers. In the face of conditions that American and European ethnographers such as Beidelman have to endure only on a temporary basis, people such as the Kaguru artfully construct multiple worlds while dwelling within the limits of their world.

What is the responsibility of the ethnographer who participates in the life world of another people, but ultimately does not have to respond to the same constraints? In another context Beidelman once wrote of anthropological fieldworkers:

The social anthropologist himself becomes an illustration of a fascinating cultural puzzle: that of men standing within and without the objects they must understand. In this respect it may not be unduly dramatic to suggest that the greatest of social anthropologists, those from whom we learn the most, appear as the most alienated and therefore perhaps the freest but most troubled of the social scientists. (1970:526)

Both Beidelman and the Kaguru live in conditions that leave them troubled but enable them to be free. The conditions of each are neither commensurate nor equal. Beidelman and most anthropologists who work with people much poorer than themselves are far freer and less troubled in material ways than the Kaguru, for example. Under those circumstances the *responsibility of anthropologists*, their vocation, is to act as witness to how other people live, how they experience their lives, and what they imagine both the experience and the alternatives to be. *The Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought* is a splendid act of witnessing, among the very best I know. It responds to the vocation of anthropologists by combining meticulous collection of data with a fine social analysis and a distanced yet participatory account of how the Kaguru do the same. For Beidelman and the best of the social anthropologists I know, ethnography is more than theory linked to data, it is as much an artifact of the moral imagination as the imaginative constructions of the Kaguru people themselves.

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