



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*Space, Time and Culture among the Iraqw of Tanzania* by Robert J. Thornton  
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Robert J. Thornton. *Space, Time and Culture among the Iraqw of Tanzania*. New York: Academic Press, 1980. 275 pp. Illus., maps, tables, biblio., index. \$29.50, hardcover.

Thornton's book on the Iraqw takes the position that what distinguishes the Iraqw from neighboring peoples of Tanzania is their use of territorial continuity as a principle of social structure. In this work he explores Iraqw culture and society in terms of this principle and seeks to discover the historical background to this development among the Iraqw.

Examining concepts of time and space in African societies is not a novel enterprise. Numerous studies, from Evans-Pritchards' classic exposition in *The Nuer* through the articles of Beidelman, Bohannon and Middleton, among others, to Michael Jackson's recent and exemplary work *The Kuranko*, use concepts of time and space to understand indigenous frameworks for the interpretations of experience, especially the understanding of ideas about concepts of the person.

In this book Thornton has developed E. H. Winter's earlier account of Iraqw social organization as based on territoriality rather than descent and has chosen to examine ideas rather than social action. The basic problem that both Winter and Thornton struggle with is whether societies with descent groups can have non-descent based principles of organization. This would seem to be a non-problem given recent developments in the theory of kinship and descent. It has been commonplace in anthropology to recognize that descent may be realized only in social categories and not necessarily used to form corporations. Fortes pointed this out as early as his article on unilineal descent groups in the mid-forties. Certainly few anthropologists take seriously evolutionary typologies such as Maines' distinction between societies based on status and those based on contract.

In spite of the use of pretentious jargon derived from phenomenology, Thornton's conclusions about Iraqw social organization are not as original as he claims, although he does provide a useful study of territoriality in one social setting. His primary contribution is to show how Iraqw use ritual to compose space and to relate ritual processes to territorial expansion among the Iraqw. Unfortunately, his discussion of the *Masay*, the ritual through which a new territory is composed, is marred by a brief and cursory description and analysis of the symbol system displayed in the ritual. Also inadequate is Thornton's account of Iraqw cosmology as it related to time and space. This is surprising since we have descriptions by Beidelman and Rigby for other Tanzanian peoples that do examine time and space from the perspectives of cosmology. While Thornton concludes that inside-outside oppositions are important in understanding Iraqw principles of space, the reader is left with little appreciation of the system of metaphor and analogy in which particular oppositions are embedded. The same

problems arise with respect to his analysis of the *Masay* ritual. A central act of the ritual is the slaughter of a bull by suffocation. Thornton analyses this as an act of enclosure. While his interpretation is convincing, the fact that he fails to take an analysis by Winter in a readily accessible publication of the same act raises questions about the degree to which he has thought carefully about alternative interpretations.

In the final chapter of the book Thornton devotes himself to Iraqw History. He does a better job here than in the earlier chapters. Thornton puts forward the provocative thesis that the bits and pieces of the mosaic we choose to call Iraqw culture can be found among many of the surrounding peoples and that North Central Tanzania is in fact composed of congeries of peoples, many with unrelated languages who share a common body of custom. What puts a distinctive stamp on the Iraqw is the degree to which they have elaborated territoriality into a principle for organizing custom into structure. Thornton seeks an explanation for the elaboration of territoriality in the nature of Iraqw expansion and in interethnic relations. This has the merit of recognizing that cultural distinctiveness is a political tool and that differences of custom among African peoples have often been exaggerated by scholars who have underestimated the degree of movement and exchange among populations. Because he uses a regional perspective as well as taking the perspective of single communities, Thornton is able to expose remarkable continuity of custom in Tanzania, and, by extension, elsewhere. This is the most valuable part of an otherwise flawed work.

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