



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Spirits of Defiance: The Mangbetu People of Zaire by Jeremy Marre
Ivan Karp

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uals and festivals that set them apart. Only evocations of immigrant or poor Jews focus on neighborhoods and communities, once the centers of American Jewish experience.

These two documentary films reflexively focus on the foundations of Jewish experience—ritual and community. They portray symbols of Jewish life in the lives of Jews. Neither uses a narrator, depending instead on the perspectives of participants to reveal symbolic meanings. We learn from both films that continuity, and all that frustrates it, appears to be the central concern of a wide variety of American Jews.

The more substantial film, *Ritual*, is a remarkably fresh, unsentimental, and effective study of Jewish ritual in America. Its images are diverse and beautiful. The film un-self-consciously and non-didactically shows traditional Jewish ritual to be a part of the lives of men and women, young and old, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, and experts and ordinary families. The self-consciousness that the film's participants bring to their celebration of ritual is on occasion quite startling. Every participant talks about the importance of performing ritual to "create meaning," and to "continue tradition," and mentions the contribution of ritual to the continuity of the family. This functionalist, albeit deeply felt and sincerely expressed, outlook reaches its most striking moment in a conversation between a student and a professor in class at the Jewish Theological Seminary for the training of Conservative rabbis. When the student expresses her concerns, not only about natural disasters, but also about the looting and indifference to human needs that follows, her instructor asks her if she has read the article by Geertz. He emphasizes the importance of understanding religion as a system of meaning. Watching "the natives" cite anthropological theory to one another for theological purposes is a sobering reminder of the challenges of studying American culture. Judaism is best grasped for the teacher and student on this occasion, and hence for the ethnographer, through the mediation of scholarship.

In each of the film's segments about daily ritual, the holiday cycle, and the life cycle, we see ample evidence of the multivocality of symbols, the power of performance, and the essential components of aesthetics and interpretation. We learn that rituals have great emotional power even when their rationales are articulated in functionalist terms.

Ritual is an important and useful film about American Jewish life, particularly useful for the study of ritual in complex society. Its opening segment, featuring definitions and

discussions of ritual by a variety of scholars, alludes to many of the key points in any theorizing about ritual. Examining how people reflect on their own ritual experiences may prove to be thought-provoking. Finally, the emotional power of many of the rituals discussed, particularly the circumcision, would be interesting to explore in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

Murray Avenue is a film about a once-vibrant Jewish neighborhood in Pittsburgh as its last immigrant businesses—the kosher butcher and bakery—close. Like *The Miracle of Intervale Avenue* (1983), and to some extent, *Number Our Days* (1977), it explores the remaining traces of an earlier Jewish settlement. All of these films rely on the powerful personalities of the last few neighborhood stalwarts they feature to communicate something about neighborhood life. *Murray Avenue* also focuses on the working lives of its main protagonists, and their frustrations that they have no one who will take over their businesses. The butcher's recitation of all the names of the former kosher butchers on Murray Avenue is simple but eloquent testimony to the neighborhood's transformation; a community that once needed nearly ten kosher butchers now needs none. And as one of the bakers noted, there are both advantages and disadvantages to having a staff for 30 years: "You all grow old together."

The lack of a future for either small businesses or the neighborhood is slightly offset by the young man who has recently purchased a neighborhood institution—a newspaper and toy shop. He has an investment in whatever new form the neighborhood might make. But the filmmaker is concerned more with the past than with the future. The film is not nostalgic. It does not reveal the hidden heroism or spirituality of these men and women as other films in this genre have. Its purpose seems more straightforwardly to document what was and will not be again.

These two films—about ritual and neighborhood—articulate the concerns of American Jews about their own futures. They suggest that the American Jewish future will not be in geographic space, but, more likely, in the sacred realm.

Spirits of Defiance: The Mangbetu People of Zaire. 1989. Produced and directed by *Jeremy Marre* for the B.B.C. series, *Under the Sun*. 59 minutes, color. For purchase or rental contact Enid Schildkrout, Department of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY 10024 (212/769-5432).

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Spirits of Defiance, about the Mangbetu people of Zaire, is a made-for-television ethnographic documentary that accompanies the American Museum of Natural History exhibition *African Reflections*. (See exhibit review, this issue.) The impetus for making this film was the meticulously researched and presented exhibition of Mangbetu art that was collected by a team of American Museum naturalists during the early years of this century. The accompanying exhibition showed that Mangbetu society and expressive culture was fashioned out of a complex ethnic and political setting, in which the Mangbetu and neighboring peoples used their local cultural resources to manage the loss of political independence and the movement to a colonial social formation.

The film takes a different tack. It displays Mangbetu culture and society as largely intact from the precolonial period, and the Mangbetu people as having a self-conscious interest in retaining their cultural forms and identity. This message is delivered by having the film move through a series of settings from Mangbetu life. The film opens with scenes from the making and sale of a chiefly drum, displays the use of drums in court dances, and follows with an interview with the ex-chief and a description of his son, the new but untested incumbent of the office.

The film shows scenes from Mangbetu economic life, ritual, and divination, and presents rather striking interviews with Italian missionaries attempting to root out what they see as unacceptable pagan practices among the Mangbetu.

Throughout, the film asserts that the Mangbetu have deliberately retained key cultural forms, such as divination and *Naando*, a cult that apparently both reinforces morality and carnivalizes and satirizes many aspects of local culture. Unfortunately, not enough is provided about how *Naando* fits with other aspects of Mangbetu culture portrayed in the film. As a result, the viewer is left with no palpable sense of how *Naando* makes sense to the Mangbetu.

The most ethnographically illuminating segment of the film includes scenes of a negotiation to compensate for the death of a kinsman. Students can really see culture and society in action in this segment. Manifested in the drama are problems of a changing economy, kinship ideas and rights and responsibilities, and differences between male and female ways of acting in public. If we had a readily available ethnography of the Mangbetu, this film would make a wonderful accompaniment to the text.

The film's general approach is panoramic. It attempts a survey of the major aspects of Mangbetu life, ranging through economy and incorporation into the state to religion and the arts. Most striking for people who see the film in association with the exhibition is the headgear. Dressing the head is a major theme in *African Reflections*, and it is clear from the film that even though the Mangbetu people no longer shape their heads from infancy, they are still a significant focus of attention. There are many carryovers from the exhibition, and a shorter form of the film accompanies the show in New York and the venues to which it will travel.

The least successful aspect of the film is the story of cultural "defiance." The state and regional economy obviously reaches into Mangbetu life; the people clearly have a complex situation to manage. Evidence is provided of Mangbetu economic innovation and changes in social life. This is accompanied by the constant reiteration of the conclusion that the Mangbetu have resisted incursions into their cultural world. The evidence provided consists primarily of filmed Mangbetu conversation and scenes of "traditional" ritual. Resistance is defined as though some sectors of Mangbetu life are kept unchanged while the people move in other directions. This is rather misleading. No idea is provided of what the "defiance" in the title is directed at, nor are Mangbetu feelings about the state and colonial history explored. By separating "traditional" ritual from contemporary economics, the film reinforces the unfortunate impression that this is a people unchanged from time immemorial. Yet the exhibition and its catalog show that Mangbetu arts are dynamic and adapted to precolonial political change and the colonial period itself. This film is fine if it accompanies the exhibition with which it is associated. By itself it can be misleading.

Treasured Islands: Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific. 1990. A video by *Lowell D. Holmes*. 72 minutes, color. Purchase only, \$300 from Poly Concepts, 2948 North Terrace Drive, Wichita, KS 67220.

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One can see how *Treasured Islands* must have seemed a very likely project. A major late-19th-century literary figure, auraed by the romance of Scottish history, sails off to the South Seas as an "invalid gentleman," builds himself a lairdly house amidst a "paradise of