

Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Creativity of Power: Essays on Cosmology and Action in African Societies by W. Arens; Ivan Karp

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REVIEWS

Arens, W. and Karp, Ivan (eds.), Creativity of Power: Essays on Cosmology and Action in African Societies, Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989, 315 pp., 0 98774 617 5

In this volume, a terse and persuasive English word, 'power,' tethers a vast range of African politico-religious phenomena. Written largely by anthropologists, these essays address the religious ideology, history and dramatization of political countrol in over a dozen societies-from the upper Nile and the Rift Valley to the Guinea coast and southern Zaire. The contributors vividly evoke the varied ideological foundations of domination and acquiescence. Moreover, they contribute the indispensable insight that 'power' is inextricably linked to more general local conceptions of personhood and agency. Despite the editors' premise, it would perhaps be better to treat 'creativity' as the touchstone of these essays, first, because they repeatedly and intelligently illustrate the point that 'power' in society flows from the transformation on inchoate energies outside society and from the re-ordering of established relationships within it. Second, what the anthology demonstrates most admirably is the *mutability* of the local rhetorics in which actors manipulate and change those relationships. Third, the authors' insistence on glossing all such phenomena as 'power' does violence to their attempt to render agency in culturally and historically sensitive terms.

Refreshing essays by Middleton, Willis, Fairley, Southall and Ebin illuminate issues of endogenous change in African politicoreligious conventions, as against a much older tradition in writing about Africa that posits the stasis of 'traditional' society and the exogenous (read, European and, occasionally, Arab) origins of change. In his reflections on Shilluk kingship, Arens offers a valuable clarification of Weber's notion of 'charisma,' arguing that, rather than being the inherent quality of an individual, it arises from a conjunction of cultural conceptions and social relationships. Karp's article is an important contribution toward a methodological re-orientation in studies of spirit possession. The author focuses on what forms of possession indicate, not about the

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motives of the possessed, but about local conceptions of agency and personhood.

This volume evokes general questions about what constitutes ideological or symbolic systems—be it logical closure, shared 'belief,' the prestige of certain institutions, or people's competition over particular objects of value. On that and other methodological issues, this collection of essays is rich in counterpoint, making them especially valuable to read as a set. However, it is surprising that this 1989 volume takes so little advantage of concepts such as 'hegemony' and 'resistance,' a fact that some will regret and others, no doubt, will appreciate.

That absence, though, is related to other lacunae. We are generally left ignorant of the material indices and consequences of 'power.' We learn little of the concrete events of life, death, hunger, procreation, pecuniary wealth or whatever that are expected to flow from the mythic, ritual and dramatic events detailed here. For example, Gottlieb describes an Ivorien people whose chiefs must, by mystical means, kill several close kinsmen in order to assume the office and the 'power' without which the town cannot be 'good.' We are left wondering what 'good' things warrant this normative killing. I do not mean to imply that these things are necessarily visible or material, just that there is a wider network of social relationships and reactions without the knowledge of which the local meaning of 'power' will remain opaque for us. A major duty attributed to the chief here is that of protecting his subjects from witchcraft. In order to do so, according to the author's informants, he must kill an additional kinsman for each person he saves from the witches, an act tantamount to destroying parts of himself. It remains unclear why we should classify such a chief's bargaining position as 'power' rather than, say, subjection, enslavement or commerce.

Despite his intention to describe the local 'power' relations manifest in spirit possession, Karp neglects to cross-reference the gendered symbolism of ritual 'capacity' with observable political roles, economic privileges and military options available to Iteso men and women. Arens pursues a lengthy and fascinating reflection on incest as a display of royal charisma without explaining the indices of kinship or the norms of permitted and encouraged sexual relations. The concepts of 'incest' and of 'kinship' can vary. We can hardly appreciate the quality of the ascending king's

charismatic violation of a social norm unless we know, the norm that he is violating.

Gottlieb's article illustrates, on the matter of the book's conceptual focus, the sometimes clumsy handling of various English language categories in relation to African cultural phenomena which, in several cases, are richly enough described for us to recognize their ill fit: 'secular' v. 'sacred' (Arens), 'nature' v. 'culture' (which Willis implies, but does not convincingly argue, are emic categories among the Fipa,) 'orthodoxy' and 'belief' (Bauer). These last two categories might very well be appropriate to Tigray thinking about religion, but we lack the data with which to judge. Bauer tells us that there is an 'orthodoxy' recognizing God's agency, as well as a group of healers who explain affliction as the doing of minor spirits and a lay majority that vocally denies 'believing in' those spirits. We are not told who authorizes the spokesmen of this 'orthodoxy,' how their pronouncements are enforced, or why we should take at face value people's public statements that they do not 'believe in' anything but the 'orthodoxy.' The very nature of local 'power' and 'authority' certainly lies at the crux of these questions. Does the status of 'belief' in people's conduct here justify its invocation by Bauer as a determinant of conduct, 'power' and 'authority'? Those with experience elsewhere in Africa will automatically suspect that many Tigray privately do empowering things with minor spirits, despite their public declarations.

It seems to me that the failure to ask such questions generates in several of these essays a willful perplexity, disguising itself as an observation about the local culture. Both Bauer and Gottlieb, for example, trivialize the terms 'contradiction' and 'paradox.' They create artificial quandaries to be solved. Are co-existing explanatory systems of diagnosis automatically contradictory? Few anthropologists since Evans-Pritchard, or at least since Janzen. have thought so. Few Africanists will find it paradoxical that kings and chiefs possess the power of mystical execution. Nor will they concur with Gottlieb, even in the case she details, that Africans systematically classify witchcraft as the 'epitome of immorality.' Indeed as Ebin points out, many African kings are expected to possess and use it; without it, they and their subjects would be vulnerable. We might, on the other hand, give these authors the benefit of the doubt: perhaps they intend to show that the 'paradox' arises not from Tigray and Beng cultures but from the application

of our own culture-bound notions of coherence to other politicoreligious systems.

One article in this collection even invokes the concept of 'civilization' in appreciation of Fipa people's European-style table manners and the concomitantly civil style of their socio-political conduct. It is clear, and interesting, that a variety of mutually reinforcing social, technological and culinary changes came over Ufipa in the 19th century and that those changes distinguished the Fipa from several other African peoples. However, Willis' evolutionary interpretation of these changes is unwarranted. Without any sign of embarrassment or circumspection, Willis indirectly characterizes the rest of the African continent as uncivilized and lacking in table manners worthy of appreciation in their own cultural terms. A much more sophisticated essay, by Wright, observes the inappropriateness of focusing on hierarchy as the foremost quality of Wolof caste society. Like Southall elsewhere in the volume, she brilliantly clarifies the complex interaction of caste, ethnicity and place of origin in local negotiations of identity, interdependency and privilege. This piece is an exemplary reconsideration of the Weberian notion of power amended and endorsed in the Introduction. On the other hand, Wright's description of mutual dependence among castes rests unnecessarily on a dichotomy between 'action' and 'speech': supposedly some castes actively govern and do things, while another caste narrates history and can destroy reputations with its utterances. Given Engard's immediately available discussion of speech act theory and the considerable literature on efficacious incantation in Africa, one is tempted to conclude that either the Wolof are highly unusual among African peoples or Wright's dichotomy is overstated. Might not the Wolof, like many other peoples, classify 'speech' as a type of 'action' rather than as its opposite?

Obviously, some European concepts are quite current and influential in Africa—even in African myths, rituals and dramas. Not only European Christianity but Islam and world capitalism have touched every ethnic group described here. Yet, their influence and the wider interaction of peoples with forces and anyone beyond the next kingdom are only occasionally and marginally noted. Money appears nowhere in these accounts. Gilbert's epigraph is a lengthy quote from an Akuropon elder, who we learn only in a footnote is Christian. Like others in the village, he or she

regularly speaks in Biblical allusions, as Gilbert herself does in entitling the entire sub-chapter on the local cosmology. Gilbert's account of the manufacture and symbolic constitution of shrines testifies to her masterful field research on a phenomenon that is both widespread and typically secret all over sub-Saharan Africa. Her report is unprecedented in its richness of detail. Yet, the gods and 'medicines' Gilbert discusses are depicted in a pristine ethnographic present. Do contemporary Akuropon conceptions and uses of ritual 'power' exclude Christian ideas altogether? Are the local Christian majority's perceptions of gods and 'medicines' irrelevant to our understanding of the contemporary meaning and effectiveness of these beings and objects? Gilbert's footnote suggests that they are not.

Most of these accounts are multi-dimensional in their explanatory frameworks. They would have benefited nonetheless from more consistent attention to gendered dimensions of action and control which, as Karp's, Ebin's and Willis' articles suggest, are often prominent in African political and religious discourse. While Foucault is repeatedly cited in an artful Introduction, some of his richest reflections on 'power' are neglected in the main body of essays. I longed for a careful discussion of, for example, the role of medical practices and of certain officials' responsibility for uterine and agricultural fertility in constituting networks of interpersonal control. I wondered how those networks effect and affect relations to the post-colonial state. The Introduction suggests finally that local ritual performances acquire special meaning in light of the colonial and post-colonial tenuousness of local politicoreligious institutions. Unfortunately, the insight goes unexamined beyond the Introduction.

The ethnographic materials presented in this volume convincingly display the variety, complexity and mutability of African politico-religious conduct. The diversity of methodological perspectives here is, in itself, equally instructive. Each essay offers edifying theoretical alternatives to the others in treating a complex and elusive set of phenomena. The questions and criticisms I have directed toward these essays in no way undermine the seminal status of this volume. On the contrary, these essays will provoke myriad questions beyond my own and energize debate over the nature of religion and politics in Africa and elsewhere. Together, these studies call into question any sense that 'power' has a single

objective character. Indeed, they highlight the importance of a precise and culturally sensitive terminology.

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JACKSON, Michael, Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989, xii 237pp., \$35, 0 253 33190 0 (cloth), \$12.95, 0 253 205 34 4 (paper)

This book is, for the most part, a collection of previous articles integrated into an overall argument about 'truth' in anthropology. It should be 'of use'—to use the central term of the pragmatism Jackson adopts—to people like anthropologists of religion and scholars in religious studies who seek terms of reference to human experience in culture which do not violate or caricature the complexity, diversity and ambiguity of that experience.

The reader with interests in religion will find here a discussion firmly grounded not only in Jackson's own field work among the Kuranko of Sierra Leone but in other ethnographic material as well. Such perennial topics as destiny and free choice, divination, mortuary ceremonies and the separation of the living from the dead, witchcraft and corporeal metamorphosis are treated. In each case Jackson attempts to give us a sense—in depth and detail—of the quality of experience present in the phenomenon; a sense too often encapsulated and distorted in the usual discursive categories of the anthropology of religion. Jackson refuses to become involved, for example, in any of the prevailing antinomies: true/false; real/illusory; rational/irrational. Taking Foucault's example rather, the author asks in what context and under what conditions a given belief and practice could be sensible and useful. In this effort at pragmatic and holistic reasoning about religious matters the mutual understanding and intersubjectivity prevailing between anthropologists and their local interlocutors are emphasized, and the author does not hesitate to introduce resonant moments of personal experience of self and other steeped in the corresponding feelings of time and place.

There is bound to be, in this effort at intersubjectivity, a plentiful awareness created in the reader of the contingency of the human

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