

Culture



Ivan KARP and Charles S. BIRD, eds. *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1980. 337 pages, US \$22.50 (cloth)

Michael Lambek

Volume 3, Number 1, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084170ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084170ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Lambek, M. (1983). Review of [Ivan KARP and Charles S. BIRD, eds. *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1980. 337 pages, US \$22.50 (cloth)]. *Culture*, 3(1), 132–133.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1084170ar>

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ceux que passionnent les royautes sacrées africaines. La plupart des traits distinctifs de l'institution s'y trouvent : le roi comme responsable unique de la prospérité — et plus particulièrement de la pluie chez les Moundang — et du malheur, le rendant ainsi ambivalent, le régicide — ou sa possibilité théorique — à intervalles réguliers, le roi comme transgresseur, l'institution de « doubles » du roi sur lesquels Adler écrit de très belles pages. Ces traits, qui forment une armature symbolique et une cosmologie en acte, sont arrangés et réarrangés avec des intensités et des dosages différents selon les royautes sacrées particulières et le mérite d'Adler est de nous avoir restitué toute la cohérence et la profondeur de la variante moundang, une des mieux analysées et des plus complètes à ce jour.

Ivan KARP and Charles S. BIRD, eds. *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1980. 337 pages, US \$22.50 (cloth).

By Michael Lambek
University of Toronto

Given the dearth of papers on systems of thought at the recent meeting of the Canadian Association of African Studies, it is encouraging to see that the subject is alive and well, even if it is south of the border among those with whom we would like to consider ourselves in structural opposition ! There are no brilliant papers in this collection, the sort that simultaneously open new theoretical vistas and captivate us with the minute particulars of another culture (as does, for example, Becker's piece on Javanese epistemology and aesthetics in the comparable recent volume on Southeast Asian symbolic systems). But there are some very good ones.

Of widest theoretical relevance are the papers by Fernandez and Kopytoff. Fernandez approaches his topic, the nature of primitive thought, with deliberate indirection. He likens the puzzling sermons of the Fang Bwiti movement to riddles, arguing that both force listeners to revitalize their knowledge, seeking and seeing order and wholeness in otherwise unrelated domains of experience. In most nonwestern societies it is such "edifying" creative synthesis rather than compartmentalization and the detection of context-specific rules which forms the goal of thought.

Kopytoff likewise makes a strong case for cultural creativity, arguing, contra Gluckman, that

the classic "rite of passage" structure of the Kita ceremonies among the Suku produces transformations in "invented" states of being ("grace") of the participants unrelated to social status. Kita is part of a regional predilection for generating higher — order revitalizing movements in the face of failure of lower order ritual to reverse perceived social entropy. But it is also bound by the limitations of regional idioms, able to provide for the "medical" renewal of the individual but not the organic social whole. The historical end product is not a revolution in religious consciousness but the accretion of numerous cults. Kopytoff speculates that this occurs where religion is pragmatic rather than transcendental ("Durkheimian"). Kopytoff's approach is highly suggestive for the comparative study of religious dynamics.

Papers of more specific theoretical relevance to the African literature include those by Burton, Vaughan, and MacGaffey. In a Durkheimian vein, Burton associates differences in religious practice between the Atuot village and cattle camp with the relative "moral densities" of the two structural phases. In brief, the village is associated with women as opposed to men, individualized and isolated social units as opposed to the collectivity, earthly as opposed to heavenly powers, and self-assertive manipulation of the powers as opposed to complacent worship. The essay is significant in reminding us (as Evans-Pritchard did) that the nature of religious thought is related to the context in which it is articulated. On this basis Burton challenges Evans-Pritchard's depiction of Nuer religion for being grounded exclusively in the cattle camp phase.

Vaughan reviews the literature on divine kingship and presents interesting data on the Marji to suggest that regicide was a sanctioned means of removing kings although the royal contenders themselves viewed the matter instrumentally in terms of political competition. Vaughan makes the important connection between regicide and the general existential problems of domestic succession, loss of dominance, and death, but the essay would have been considerably strengthened with reference to Lienhardt's analysis of the self-sacrifice of the Dinka spear-masters and to Eliade's discussion of cyclical time and regeneration.

MacGaffey raises issues about comparison and typology which many of the other contributors to the volume (especially Arens) could have read to their benefit. Rather than studying reified abstractions ("witchcraft", "sorcery", "spirit possession", etc.) we should examine the structure of role sets as prescriptions for social action. MacGaffey discovers

various criteria (means, legitimacy, etc.) according to which religious roles are distinguished and then classes together widely dispersed African societies which make use of the same criteria. As the essay progresses it gets more and more ambitious, relating distinctions in religious roles to political and economic structures and concluding that such roles form intrinsic parts of various modes of production. The argument is problematic, not least because not all socially significant religious action is organized in terms of discrete roles, in all societies. Nevertheless, presented in a less compact fashion, it may provide a useful framework for comparing Central African societies.

The most penetrating analyses of the thought systems of specific societies are those provided by the editors. Bird and Kendall present a tightly written fascinating account of the Mande person and philosophy of action as exemplified by the ambivalent figure of the epic hero. Mande epic poetry not only illustrates the prestige system but is a dynamic part of it. Praise songs are the reward for returning adventurers — and link the heroes of the past with the migrant labourers of the present. The material deserves book length treatment. From the other side of the continent Karp provides a solidly “thick” description of Iteso beer-drinking. The beer party is a “key scenario”, constrained by elaborate rules of etiquette which attempt to achieve an idealized sociability and “engrossment” in the face of social differences and hidden antagonisms. As such, “the beer party is the Iteso means of imagining the antinomies of their experience of self, society, and other” (p. 114).

Ray presents a stimulating analysis of a Kiganda myth of the origins of death in which death is understood in terms of the social structure and vice versa. Where Ray sees an opposition between immortality and marriage the data could also be read to suggest that it is precisely the *reluctance* of a father and daughter to separate and of a husband to maintain alliance relations with his brother-in-law that brings death into action. In any case, through marriage individual death is balanced by social continuity. If Ray’s structuralism is largely implicit, de Heusch demonstrates, contra Lévi-Strauss, that ritual is coded in the same way that Lévi-Strauss has shown for myth. From Junod’s rich ethnography de Heusch provides a coherent structural analysis of Thonga childbirth rituals. This is a welcome contribution, given the dearth of myth among the Southern Bantu, which will no doubt provide a basis for the study of transformations throughout the region, although one should not ignore the additional properties of ritual as action.

The remaining papers include competent accounts of sexuality and aging in two East African societies by Beidelman, and changes in Bashu interpretations of misfortune by Packard. Finally, Bauer and Hinnant attempt to apply Kuhn to competing religious practices in two Ethiopian societies, and Arens assures us that the polyethnic population of a small Tanzanian town really do distinguish “witchcraft” and “sorcery” just like the Azande.

Viewed as a whole, the main themes and tendencies of the book appear to be a concern with the ways in which thought systems handle existential dilemmas (rather than specific social structural problems), and an interest in the pragmatic rather than the systematic aspects of African thought. The first is to be whole-heartedly applauded while the second appears to repeat in only slightly narrower terms the opposition that characterized the Fortes and Dieterlen volume between approaches that begin with social relations and cosmology respectively. To characterize African religion as predominantly pragmatic in orientation is to ignore the turmoil of the last few centuries, the colonial and post-colonial contexts, as well as the great diversity within the continent. Many of the essays provide glimpses of the multi-faceted nature of religious phenomena *within* particular societies and of past eras in which, in Weber’s sense, the world was still enchanted. It is of interest to compare the various systems of temporal coherence and the ways in which they have structured the experience of change and themselves collapsed, transformed, or survived. Substantive comparative work and synthesis on a regional or continental basis is still ahead of us.

As a final point, we may ask how representative of current work this book is. In general, the scope is broad, however claims by the editors to overcome national styles to the contrary, West Africa is under-represented, Griaule and his school unmentioned. I also found an absence of papers on ritual performance. Moreover, it is certainly surprising that only one out of fifteen authors is female.