

Culture



David J. HUFFORD, *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. 278 pages, US \$25.00 (cloth)

William L. Rodman

Volume 3, numéro 2, 1983

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078151ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078151ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

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

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Rodman, W. (1983). Compte rendu de [David J. HUFFORD, *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. 278 pages, US \$25.00 (cloth)]. *Culture*, 3(2), 91–93. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078151ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society /
Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1983

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des
services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique
d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de
l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à
Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

points of similarity between African music and the traditional music styles of other parts of the world. Again what is not done is as important as what is: 'The music is perhaps best considered as an arrangement of gaps where one may add a rhythm, rather than as a dense pattern of sound'. A richness of commentary by African musicians on what constitutes good style plus a discussion of those moments where the author, by his playing, succeeded in moving his audience make this chapter the richest in the book. 'Values in Africa' presents a fascinating musical perspective on the nature of social order in African societies.

A tape cassette is available from the publisher which illustrates the rhythms discussed in the book and which is keyed to relevant passages in the book. While not necessary to follow the arguments given in the book, it is certainly a wonderful adjunct to it.

Not many scholars will ever be able to achieve the kind of synthesis of 'doing' and 'writing about' their subject matter that Chernoff has achieved, but he has given us an excellent illustration of what is possible.

Alain TESTART, *Les chasseurs-cueilleurs ou l'origine des inégalités*, Paris, Société d'Ethnographie, 1982. 250 pages, bibliographie.

Par Jérôme Rousseau
Université McGill

Cet ouvrage est une discussion systématique des facteurs qui permettent ou amènent une complexification des systèmes sociaux chez les chasseurs-cueilleurs. L'auteur montre en particulier qu'il est aberrant de considérer comme des exceptions les sociétés de chasseurs-cueilleurs sédentaires où est présente une différenciation sociale: les chasseurs-cueilleurs ne constituent pas un type de société. On peut tout au moins différencier deux catégories majeures: les sociétés nomades et les sédentaires. Ces dernières forment l'objet de cet ouvrage, et en particulier celles de pêcheurs sédentaires. L'auteur s'attaque aussi à l'idée que l'adoption d'un mode de vie agricole représente le tournant majeur dans l'histoire de l'humanité.

Selon Testart, le facteur central dans la différenciation et la complexification des systèmes sociaux dépend de l'importance donnée au stockage des ressources de base. C'est le stockage, et non l'agriculture, qui est l'élément stratégique de la sé-

dentarisation, de la diversification de la technologie, de l'expansion démographique et du développement de l'inégalité sociale et de la guerre.

L'auteur commence son propos en décrivant plusieurs de ces sociétés réputées exceptionnelles: celles de la côte nord-ouest américaine, du sud-est sibérien, de la Californie, du delta de l'Orénoque, ainsi que le cas natoufien (où la sédentarisation a précédé l'agriculture). Il base son propos à la fois sur des données ethnographiques et archéologiques. Après avoir dégagé les grandes lignes de ces systèmes sociaux, il étudie quelques cas limites, et pose ensuite la question du lien entre contraintes naturelles et développement d'une économie de chasseurs-cueilleurs où il y a stockage.

Cet ouvrage montre clairement que c'est au niveau de l'économie, et non à celui de l'écologie, que l'on doit commencer l'analyse des systèmes sociaux. Il ne s'agit pas là bien sûr d'un point de vue nouveau; plusieurs ouvrages récents ont analysé l'importance du stockage et du développement de l'inégalité dans des sociétés de chasseurs-cueilleurs. Le mérite de cet ouvrage est de présenter de façon systématique, et avec une série d'exemples, un argument qui a été avancé ailleurs à propos de groupes spécifiques. L'ouvrage est clair, bien présenté, et agréable à lire. Il sera particulièrement utile à des fins didactiques.

David J. HUFFORD, *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. 278 pages, US \$25.00 (cloth).

By William L. Rodman
McMaster University

The paranormal and the supernatural remain fields of study peripheral to anthropology, happy hunting grounds for would-be shamans, positivist debunkers, crypto-phenomenologists and a few die-hard functionalists. Given the marginality of the field, and given a title that sounds more like a creature-feature than a work of serious scholarship, *The Terror That Comes in the Night* may not receive the wide readership within anthropology that it deserves. That would be a pity, because David Hufford has written a monograph that is innovative, provocative and just a bit unsettling.

Most scientists, like most members of the public, believe that the supernatural is a domain built on

tissues of fancy rather than on matters of fact. Ever since E.B. Tylor, anthropologists and folklorists have tended to view traditions relating to the supernatural as the end-products of faulty logic and the natural misperceived as the unnatural. Witches, demons and manticores don't exist: they are cultural artifacts, fragments of a peoples' collective imagination.

What Hufford suggests is this: the conventional model of the relationship between beliefs concerning the supernatural and subjective experience is too simple and is based on too many unquestioned assumptions. He presents evidence that a widespread supernatural tradition results directly from experience; culture determines the way in which people interpret the experience but does not determine the experience itself. If Hufford is right, then, quite simply, a lot of current thinking about the supernatural is wrong.

The focus of Hufford's inquiry is a Newfoundland folk belief in a night terror that people call "The Old Hag." The Old Hag is a living legend, an experience as well as a tradition. On the basis of a sample of university students, Hufford estimates that as many as 23% of all present-day Newfoundlanders consider themselves to have been victims of an Old Hag attack. The victims share a common fund of experiences. An assault occurs just before sleep or immediately after waking. We're not dealing here with nightmares, at least not in the usual sense of the word: victims perceive their environment realistically, and they can recall the assault in detail. There is none of the distortion so common in dreams. An attack may begin with a sense of unease, a feeling that a presence has entered your room. You hear footfalls, or you may see an indistinct form. Then, typically, you feel pressure on your chest, or perhaps strangulation. You're awake, you're aware, you're having a terrible time but you can't go anywhere to tell anyone what an awful time you're having: you're paralysed.

Immobility, intense fear, wakefulness and unclouded perception are invariable concomitants of an Old Hag assault. If the experience is contingent upon familiarity with Newfoundland's folkloric traditions, then, Hufford reasons, populations that have had no contact with the tradition should be free from such attacks. In fact, phenomena resembling Old Hag attacks appear to be common outside Newfoundland. Hufford presents transcripts of his interviews with people living in the United States who claim to have had precisely the same experience that a Newfoundlander would describe as an Old Hag attack. He also finds descriptions of supernatural assaults with the defining characteristics of Old Hag

attacks in ethnographic materials concerning the Inuit and the peoples of the Philippines.

How can the Old Hag and equivalent night terrors best be explained? In a lively and intriguing chapter, Hufford discusses the contribution of current research on sleep phenomena to understanding of supernatural assaults. Such research suggests that the Old Hag experience may be a kind of hypnogogic hallucination; the Old Hag is most likely to pay a visit when a person's rapid eye movement intrudes into wakefulness. Hufford is careful to point out that sleep research provides an explanation for the timing, but not the content, of the experience. In truth, he concludes, "the content of this experience cannot be satisfactorily explained on the basis of current knowledge" (p. 246).

Hufford presents his study as a report of work in progress and makes no attempt to inflate the significance of his findings. His modesty is appropriate: much research remains to be done on supernatural assault phenomena. Moreover, his present study is not without methodological flaws and conceptual peculiarities. If, as Hufford insists, the Old Hag experience is independent of tradition, then why label the experience with a term restricted to one particular tradition? A more basic issue is whether, in fact, Hufford's data support his conclusion that "the pattern of the (Old Hag) experience and its distribution appear independent of explicit cultural models" (p. 245). He admits that sixteen of the twenty-five detailed first-hand cases he presents of encounters with the supernatural come from informants familiar with his work on the Old Hag. He recognizes the potential for bias in his sample and he seems to regard the nine "naive subjects" who had never heard of his research at the time of their interviews as the best evidence for the validity of his position. Their cases do not provide a strong enough foundation to bear the weight of his argument. A host of supernatural phenomena share characteristics with the Old Hag, and we live in a society in which popular interest in such phenomena is pervasive. "Succubus" (essentially, an erotic Hag) has been used as a title for more than one low-budget film; it's hard to find subjects who are truly naive about supernatural assault traditions in a society where such films are popular entertainment.

Yet it's curious that people who live in societies far outside the boundaries of North American popular culture fear something very much like the Old Hag. For example, one can find an extended, detailed description of the Old Hag experience in Robert Levy's *Tahitians: Mind and Experience in the Society Islands* (University of Chicago Press). Clearly, Hufford is on to something, a set of linkages

between physiological processes, mental configurations and supernatural traditions that is widely distributed, little investigated and poorly understood. Hufford's monograph is a model of academic discretion: he is scholar enough to ask the right questions and canny enough to shy away from easy answers.

James W. FERNANDEZ, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982. 731 pages, US \$25.00 (paper), US \$85.00 (cloth).

By Michael Lambek
University of Toronto

There are two main themes or arguments in this major work on the syncretic and intertribal Bwiti religion among the Fang of equatorial Africa. One argument concerns the relationship between religious thought and imagery in Fang Bwiti culture and, by implication, in primitive society generally; the other concerns the direction of religious thought and activity in the specific context of Fang history. The former of these, found mostly in Part III of the book, is the more significant, but the latter is also conducted with considerable skill and subtlety. If some of the points have been made by Fernandez elsewhere, they gain by their reappearance in a unified work which is obviously the culmination of years of reflection.

On page 522, puzzling over the complex Bwiti sermons which really form the heart of his interest, Fernandez remarks that "a full exegesis would be lengthy indeed, a contextualization which would lead out to the entire culture..." This explains the thrust of the preceding 500 pages, an elucidation of "the reservoir of images and metaphors at the [sermonizer's] service". On the surface the endeavour appears to be a kind of historical particularism, a residue from his teacher Herskovitz's teacher, Boas. But Fernandez's aims are more profound than the recovery of a chain of associations. For Fernandez Fang thought is essentially "iconic rather than conceptual or expository in a discursive and abstract, logically consistent sense" (p. 569); its products are fabulations out of concrete and familiar images.

This sounds like Lévi-Strauss, but Fernandez distinguishes, not always consistently, sign images, or iconic representations, from symbols, defined as

explicit rules or models. It is in its representations, not its abstractions, that the core of Fang culture is found. Order is "gradually exposed" rather than imposed (p. 304), based on images rather than rules. As one informant said, "Christianity... one hears by the ears. But we Fang do not learn that way. We learn by the eyes" (p. 481). Where Lévi-Strauss turns to myth as the paradigmatic genre for uncovering the "science" of the concrete and dismisses the problem of translation, Fernandez likens the products of Fang thought to poetry. A central metaphor in Fernandez's text is Coleridge's Kublai Khan. Translation entails the subtle task of accounting for the selection and juxtaposition of particular images. And figurative thought suggests rather than explicates. Thus the point about the analogy drum, drumstick: woman, man is not simply the clever mediation of an opposition but the rhetorical force: therefore they make music together. The puns in the Bwiti sermons point to a unity in diversity, forcing the listener, like the anthropologist, to consider larger contexts. In the metaphoric richness of complex rituals and sermons the "reverberation between levels and domains of interest" provides a sense of the "overarching integrity of things" (p. 646); "similarity in domains of experience is transformed into... contiguity" (p. 573). Cosmology is thus emergent rather than structural, a rare product of ritual and iconic thought, not a logical prerequisite or propositional base for them.

Perhaps Fernandez emphasizes this side of what may be a dialectical process in order to articulate the tremendous achievement of Bwiti: the creation of coherence in a context of despair, the imposition of a "saving circularity" on the unidirectionality of historical time and space and the fragmentation of the personal life cycle that confront the Fang. Images from the previously abandoned ancestor cult, from that of the neighbouring Mtsogo (where Fernandez's energy in tracking down the sources of images finally fails him), and from Christianity are brought together to reconnect the living and the dead. Bwiti restores confidence in the self while providing a collective "oneheartedness".

While the discussion of revitalization movements is common enough in the anthropological literature (and little cited here), Fernandez presents a particularly subtle and solidly grounded account of the historical and ethnographic context: the decline of traditional idioms, the decentring of the village and disincorporation of social groupings, the lack of "dramatic movement" in people's lives, and the growing power of anti-social, individualistic sources of evil as "the healthy and normal flow of personal and social life... [becomes] strangled by a surfeit of