

## Culture

**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)**

Michael Lambek



Volume 3, numéro 2, 1983

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078152ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078152ar>

[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

Lambek, M. (1983). Compte rendu de [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)]. *Culture*, 3(2), 93–94. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078152ar>

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/>

**é**rudit

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/>

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

desire" (pp. 239-40). Add to this the extremely low birth rate as the result of venereal disease spread from the lumber camps, and its effect on relations between the sexes and it is no wonder that the Fang seek renewal in Bwiti.

Or do they? Fernandez's unabashed support for Bwiti (he even suggests that the leading figure in the village would be better off in the new religion) fails to come to grips with his own figures: Bwiti has never managed to attract more than 8-10% of the total population. Bwiti does not appear to be truly transformative at the societal level. Since, despite the cosmogonic claims Fernandez makes for it, Bwiti does not displace Fang culture, perhaps it should be seen, like the other mobile cults and dances in the region, as a part of the larger whole, as a particularly rich resource among many into which Fang can dip at will. Fernandez provides a fascinating and innovative "intellectual history" of the Fang—European dialogue, but he fails to discuss fully the satisfactions of contemporary Christianity or the other interests which keep the vast majority out of Bwiti, or at least away from full commitment, and the forces which create family conflicts at each new recruitment. That Fernandez avoided a functionalist analysis of mainstream Fang life of the 1950's is a tribute to his clear vision, but in painting a negative picture of Fang social life, perhaps he goes too far the other way. Certainly his portraits of individual Fang introduced into the narrative as "argumenti personae" turn out to be disappointingly unidimensional.

These criticisms aside, *Bwiti* is a wonderful book, the art of ethnography at its highest, literate, engaging, superbly documented, always original and thought-provoking, while eschewing any inherited or invented procrustean bed of theory. Fernandez is particularly apt at evoking the vitality of Bwiti, "the pleasures... of ritual activity," even while providing a complex analysis of its sources in such abstract processes as condensation, syllogisms, and metaphoric predication. Like the Bwiti sermonizer, Fernandez offers us subtle words which, to use one of his favourites, edify. One of the critical tasks of anthropology, whether conceived in its materialist or symbolic veins, is the comprehension of whole, autonomous worlds. In the colonial and capitalist eras perhaps this can only be achieved indirectly, through imaginative reconstruction. An image, however hazy, of this wholeness is the edifying achievement of Fernandez through his meticulous cataloguing of what, during the last century, the Fang have lost. And this sense of wholeness too, as Fernandez demonstrates, is the achievement of Bwiti.

Louis DUMONT, *Affinity as a Value: Marriage Alliance in South India, with Comparative Essays on Australia*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983. 230 pages, US \$22.00 (cloth).

By David Turner  
University of Toronto

Rodney Needham once asked me, if I were to translate an anthropological classic from another language into English which one would it be. My reply was Louis Dumont's *Dravidian et Kariera*. Apart from the intriguing comparison between South Indian and Australian society therein—intriguing as much because of the contrasts as the correspondences—there was Dumont's insistence that in neither case could affinity be assimilated to consanguinity as leading theoreticians of the time were insisting. This is also the theme of the present volume, itself a collection of essays published by Professor Dumont between 1953 and 1970, including four articles in *Dravidian et Kariera*. Of the book's five articles, two—"The Kariera Kinship Vocabulary" and "Nayar Marriages as Indian Facts"—are available for the first time in English. Of the remaining three, one—"Descent or Inter-marriage? A Relational View of Australian Section Systems"—is on Australia, and two—"The Dravidian Kinship Terminology as an Expression of Marriage" and "Marriage Alliance in South Indian Kinship"—are on South India.

The reason for bringing these previously published articles together in a single volume is compelling: Dumont's analyses have not only not been superseded but also not really understood. And the reason for the misunderstanding or, really, the inability to comprehend? Even anthropologists are unable to break through conventional habits of Western thought to alien realities.

In South India, insists Professor Dumont, in contrast to the West where affinity is subordinated to consanguinity, affinity is itself transmitted from generation to generation. The "mother's broker", for instance, is thought of as the father's brother-in-law and not as the *mother's brother*. To anthropologists who have imposed the latter translation on the data, he says,

the terms in which the people actually think their kinship relationships, are more important than the terms in which (they tell us that) they think they are thinking.