



Review: Revisiting the African Diaspora

Reviewed Work(s):

Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora by Joseph M. Murphy

Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories by George Brandon

Santería Garments and Altars: Speaking without a Voice by Ysamur Flores-Peña; Roberta J. Evanchuk

J. Lorand Matory

American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 98, No. 1. (Mar., 1996), pp. 167-170.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-7294%28199603%292%3A98%3A1%3C167%3ARTAD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8>

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Revisiting the African Diaspora

J. LORAND MATORY
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Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora. Joseph M. Murphy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. 263 pp.

Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories. George Brandon. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. 207 pp.

Santería Garments and Altars: Speaking without a Voice. Ysamur Flores-Peña and Roberta J. Evanchuk. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 72 pp.

In general, our discipline has marginalized African American cultures. To the dominant anthropological gaze, they have evidently seemed more like underdeveloped facsimiles of "us" than like the cultural Others that initially defined our territory within the academy. We have left a gap to be filled by sociologists, historians, art historians, folklorists, and political scientists. The insights of everything from structural-functionalism to the recent "reflexive" ethnography have, with a few exceptions, been lost to the anglophone literature on African Americans. It is true that ethnographers Gilberto Freyre, Roger Bastide, and Fernando Ortiz have done much to make a literate public aware of Africa's contribution to so-called *Latin* American cultures, but the debate between anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier over the African contribution to *North* American culture has done more to reveal the political motives behind all such assertions about cultural genealogy than to energize debates of relevance to anthropology as a whole.

It is time for anthropology to reassert its relevance. We have more to contribute than Herskovits's decontextualizing pursuit of "Africanisms." Yet as anthropology increasingly abandons the sense that cultures can be treated as integrated wholes (all too often coterminous with the administrative projects of nation-states), we would do well to take a new look at those African American communities that—often in dialogue with our colleagues—defined themselves in neodiffusionist terms as nations apart, diasporas, and transnational communities, long before postcolonial theory made it fashionable to recognize that many non-African communities do so as well. These days, text- and elite-oriented literary critics and political scientists too often beat us to the punch, casting a shadow of irrelevance over the forms of popular community-building and cultural synthesis that African Americanists have been studying for so long.

Written by a historian of religion, an anthropologist, and two folklorists, the three works discussed here repre-

sent an instructive array of methods for studying communal self-conceptions in the African diaspora. They are not perfectly heterogeneous: all begin with the premise that African cultural influences deserve central attention when we study the religions of New World blacks and mulattoes. But while two of these books detail what is allegedly enduring in those religions, the third focuses on processes of creativity. While one discusses what is African across a whole range of New World traditions, the other two focus on a single, Afro-Cuban religion, which outsiders call "Santería." One book illustrates ritual conventions, another details a collective history, and the final one documents the practices and concerns of a single priest.

Working the Spirit compares five religions practiced by the descendants of Africans in the New World—Haitian Vodou, Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban and Cuban American Santería, Protestant Revivalism in Jamaica, and black Christianity in the United States. In a highly readable style, Murphy shows us the migratory, economic, and political forces that have shaped these religions over time, and he richly documents, from secondary sources and his own observations, some ceremonies that reveal local people's perceptions of their relationship with the divine. Murphy's analysis reveals the historical development of differences among these various religions but focuses on the forms of "motor behavior," music and beliefs about ecstasy that unite these religions, distinguish them from European religion, and therefore appear to derive from African origins. Most refreshing is the author's demonstration of the politically liberating agenda that is often noted in black North American Christianity but usually goes unnoticed in the Afro-Latin religions.

However, numerous small errors of fact and spelling result from the brevity of the author's acquaintance with particular religions. For example, the term *ebomin*, referring to a senior initiate in the Candomblé, is translated as "senior wife" (p. 192). In my experience, those few Brazilians who think it needs to be translated refer to its Yorùbá cognate, *ègbón-òṅ mi*, which means "senior sibling." Not only in this work but in general, the "Africa" extrapolated from New World investigations is sometimes unrecognizable to Africanists: one hears of the god Ọ̀ránmíyàn as "the father of the Nagô at Ilé Ifé" (p. 187); of a "Kétu" kingdom in Nigeria (p. 83); and of "Obatala, the first king at Ilé Ifé" (pp. 187–188). The geography, mythic references, and orthography are an unpredictable combination of fact, fancy, and local vocabulary that does not transfer well from one continent to another. For example, in West Africa the "Nàgò," or "Ànàgò," are usually considered a western subgroup of the Yorùbá, who live nowhere near

Ilé-Ifè (as it is spelled in standard Yorùbá orthography). The Kétu, or Kétou, kingdom is centered in the Republic of Bénin, not Nigeria. The "father" and first king of the Yorùbá is generally said to be Odùduà, not Ọbàtálá or Ọránmíyàn, and I know of no particular connection between Ọránmíyàn and the western Nàgó-Yorùbá.

Nonetheless, it is no small accomplishment that Murphy's is to date the most systematic comparative study of Africa-inspired religions in the New World. Its vivid descriptions and optimistic tone are well suited to its non-specialist target audience. The book comprehensively surveys the literature supporting its general Herskovitsian premise; it also briefly cites the literature, exemplified by the writings of E. Franklin Frazier, Sidney Mintz, and Richard Price, that focuses its explanations on the New World contexts of these religions. Murphy responds with the general observation that these religions structure mutual-aid societies and that their "spirit" of cooperation amid adversity is an important aspect of the "spirits" that they venerate.

The author could have done more to acknowledge Christian precedents that may have shaped Candomblé and Santería. Despite the author's illuminating references to Hellenistic and Christian theological analogies—such as *leitourgia* ("liturgy," or "work") and *pneuma* ("spirit")—the uninformed reader will have no sense that the prominence of, for example, death-and-rebirth imagery, mystical marriage to the divine, tales of the miraculous multiplication of food (p. 102), and the expectation of human-divine reciprocity in these African American religions has significant West African and Catholic precedents (see, e.g., Brandon, p. 45 ff.). Such a reader might be led to overestimate the degree to which the average Jamaican Revivalist or black North American Protestant is consciously "oriented" toward Africa in her politics or readings of the Bible and to believe that every practice that Afro-Latin worshippers call "African" is also African in some literal or ethnographic sense.

One of the more slippery consequences relates to the status of "translations" of New World sacred songs. Although, in my experience, Afro-Latin worshippers regularly believe that their songs are in African languages, they are almost never able to translate these songs word for word. What they can specify, and what they tend to think is the most important aspect of a song's meaning, is the *part* of the ritual in which it should be sung and the *mythic events* to which it refers. What are we to make, then, of the "correction"/transcription of these songs into the closest identifiable, semigrammatical Yorùbá and the subsequent translation of these "corrected" songs back into an American vernacular (usually English) by a specialist (usually Nigerian) whom the investigator has enlisted to do so? Such translations are often news (albeit welcome news, which soon becomes canonical) to the New World devotees. Nonetheless, often enough, significant portions of

these translations are doubted by English-speaking Nigerian priests. Murphy reports the assertion by Candomblé priests that they have preserved much of the West African religious heritage that Nigerian priests have forgotten (p. 178). These claims are often made to preempt the suggestion that some allegedly African aspect of New World language or practice has resulted from an American innovation, which, of course, would diminish its prestige. These and other American interpretations of Africa should certainly be reported, but they need not be regarded as reliable cultural history.

Brandon's *Santería from Africa to the New World* curiously combines a Herskovitsian narrative framework with a number of theoretically innovative subplots. It is surely the most detailed documentation to date of the sociopolitical contexts of Santería, its West African precedents, and the North American practices to which it has contributed. As such, it is an invaluable reference book for specialists. Though Brandon's other work reveals a prodigious knowledge of the details of contemporary practice in New York-area Santería, the author has consciously set aside the ethnographic project in order to detail here a history of the "reconstitution" of a "traditional African religion" in Cuba and the United States. The scholarly narrative describes, sometimes in speculative terms, how past generations of Afro-Cuban worshippers strategized to achieve the "survival," "preservation," and "perpetuation" of their "traditional" African religion. They succeeded by virtue of collective determination and the uninterrupted intergenerational transmission of the "collective memory" of ancient ritual conventions.

Among believers, this is the dominant narrative of Santería's history, but what I find equally fascinating is its situational and partisan character. Worshippers invoke it variously to justify particular ritual practices, to prove the nonracist nature of Cuban society, to assert the dignity of Africans and their descendants against the racist ideologies of New World whites, to justify the elimination of Catholic saints from the religion, and other such causes. It should be acknowledged that other worshippers, and the same worshippers at other times, emphasize the distinct Cubanness or Latino-ness of their religion, as when they renounce the modifications introduced by black North American converts or circumvent the authority asserted by itinerant Nigerian Yorùbá priests. Even the most ardently Africa-centered black North American worshippers embrace within the structure of their belief astrology, references to Greco-Roman gods, and very North American racial conceptions of why this religion rightfully belongs to "black" people rather than to the self-described "white" Cubans who claim apical authority in Cuban American Santería. It is easier to explain such a configuration of beliefs in terms of post-1960s North American culture (including Cuban American racial and political

ideas) than in terms of anything I know about West African Yorùbá culture.

On the other hand, Brandon gives us an unprecedented and persuasive outline of the forms of variation within *òriṣà/oricha* worship in North America, which he relates to the varying degrees of Catholic and Kardecian Spiritist influence upon any given temple. The author uses Fernando Ortiz's concept of transculturation to contextualize this variation, suggesting at one point that what local people classify as African or as Catholic is, far from being literally that, a hybrid, local, and situational formulation. By showing us the array of practices associated with Santería among Latino immigrants, Brandon implicitly denaturalizes partisan Cuban and Puerto Rican claims that their practice is inherently more authentic, fixed, or primordial than that of black North Americans. Indeed, in one of the most gripping subplots, we see how the fashionable interest in Afro-Cuban culture among the Cuban bourgeoisie of the 1920s through the 1940s—Afro-Cubanismo—may have reshaped the religion. However, I am not sure that this denaturalizing project is a good enough reason for Brandon's otherwise unexplained deletion of accents from numerous Spanish- or Cuban-origin terms—such as *Lucumí*, *San Lázaro*, *Changó*, *Yemayá*, and, most strikingly, *Santería* itself.

In a further subplot, we are shown how certain European or Catholic symbolic vocabulary, such as the term "mass" (*misa*), is shared across a whole range of these religious variations. Thus, Brandon argues that, except when multiple religions have only recently come together, practitioners tend to be unaware of the hybridity of their practices. The author does not specify the historical periods when such unawareness was evident, but, for these reasons, he concludes that there is no such thing as "syncretism." It is still difficult to see how this particular denunciation of the conventional ethnographic wisdom supports Brandon's overall narrative of African continuity. The author's analytic choice to search for what is literally African in these varied permutations of Afro-Euro-American religion is never self-consciously acknowledged, and the reader is led to believe that the survival of an African tradition is the one historically and ethno-graphically true narrative of Santería's essential character. When we read Brandon's concluding lament about how terribly traditions of African-descended people have been "scarred" by the imposition of other cultures and his declaration that this book is intended to prevent the recurrence of such scarring, we grasp with a final clarity Brandon's own partisan role in a local and nonanthropological debate. He seems to align himself closely with the effort of black North American converts to "restore" the religion to its African essence.

The ethnographic pursuit of the African sources of American religions is no less worthwhile or any more politically motivated than the pursuit of the Greco-Roman

and Western European models of and for most of our other dominant cultural projects. But I would urge Afrocentric and Eurocentric scholars alike to be more self-conscious in their assumptions about the relationship between diasporas and the classical origins they claim and more attentive to the interested nature of insiders' narratives. Of course, Eurocentric scholars are in much greater need of this warning because their scholarly lapses are so much more organic to North American popular ideology and so much more destructive to the rights of so-called minorities. Nevertheless, the Harold Blooms of the world have much in common with the Afrocentrists they deplore (see Bloom, *The Western Canon*, Harcourt Brace, 1994).

Santería Garments and Altars is far more narrowly focused than either Murphy's or Brandon's book. It was written by two graduate students in folklore and mythology at UCLA. The authors are Ysamur Flores-Peña, a priest of Santería, and his "goddaughter" in the religion, Roberta Evanchuk. It consists of two major essays and a series of beautiful photographs concerning the altars and sacred clothing of one Los Angeles–Puerto Rican temple of Santería. Among the four authors discussed in this essay, these two are the least determined to confine the significance of their religion to its enduring "Africanness." The authors begin their joint introduction with the words "Santería is one of the religions that originated with, but is now separate from, African practices in Southwestern Nigeria" (p. 7).

The book details how multicolored cloth, beads, sequins, cowries, and ceramics are used to create altars and clothing representing the supposedly primordial themes of the religion, particularly as they are expressed in canonical myths called *patakis* (in West African Yorùbá, *pàtàkì* means "to be important"). These themes include royalty, wealth, coolness, timelessness, heavenly brilliance, and the diverse but stereotypic personalities of the gods—such as the storminess of Oyá, the virility of Changó, and the purity of Obatalá. The authors' central concern is the role of personal creativity in the expression of these themes. Thus, we witness the aesthetic consequences of Flores-Peña's personal political views (i.e., his objection to clothing that resembles that of 19th-century slave holders), of his unusual concern for the comfort of his initiates, of the variable relationship between priests and seamstresses, of certain creative problems (e.g., how to dress a male servitor of a female god without making him look effeminate), and of the constant fear of criticism by other priests. The importance of European Catholic saints and aesthetic conventions—such as the apparent modeling of Santería's cloth altars on European thrones and theatrical proscenia—are fully acknowledged (see also David H. Brown, "Thrones of the Orichas," *African Arts* 26(4):44–59), and the transformative effects of immigration and urban shortages of space are discussed at length.

On the other hand, the authors make no great effort to check the accuracy of their references to West African Yorùbá religion. For example, they write *awo merindilogun* (really "sixteen mysteries"), rather than the usual *owó [eyo] méréndínlógún* for "sixteen cowry shells." And they write *ntutu* instead of *òtútù*, the Yorùbá word for "coolness" (p. 9). In my experience, both of these terms are uncommon in *santero* discourse. Yet, the use of such apparently Yorùbá terms conveys authority among literate priests. Since the authors are both devotees and scholars, it is difficult to decide whether to judge these usages as scholarly errors or as an ethnographically revealing phenomenon in themselves. As in Brandon's and Murphy's books, accents are deleted from the Cuban names of the gods, and some spellings are entirely anglicized (following the orthography of an older British ethnography on the West African Yorùbá), thus giving a less Spanish and more African feel to the text and its referent.

Clearly, though, the great virtues of this book as a scholarly work lie in its exhaustive documentation of a

finite but also very illuminating aspect of Santería in the United States. Its accomplishment is both unprecedented and beautiful. Rather than an ambitious historical and schematic overview, what we witness here are the aesthetic concerns of a small number of specific interlocutors. This book displays neither an enduring "tradition" nor the discursive struggle of African Americans for authority in their religions and dignity in their home societies. Rather, we encounter the most nondiscursive, oblique, nonconfrontational, homey, pedestrian, and yet creative dimensions of an immigrant religion too often spotlighted for its most exotic dimensions, such as animal sacrifice. To their credit, the authors explain this aspect of their agenda early (p. 7) and then go far beyond it. Though the authors are folklorists, they advance ongoing anthropological debates over personal agency by microscopically revealing its role in the reproduction of a sacred diaspora. ■

Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: Locating Ethnography

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When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography. Caroline B. Brettell, ed. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1993. 200 pp.

On the Production of Knowledge: Fieldwork in South Gujarat, 1971–1991. Hein Streefkerk. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993. 50 pp.

The Politics of Ethnographic Reading and Writing: Confrontations of Western and Indigenous Views. Nijmegen Studies in Development and Cultural Change, 13. Henk Driessen, ed. Saarbrücken: Verlag Breitenback Publishers, 1993. 183 pp.

Postmodern anthropology has challenged each of us to reexamine our involvement in the production of ethnographic texts—the constructions, reconstructions, power relationships, political stances, interpretations, and inventions that influence the way we prepare and present what we learned in the field. For many of us it was painful to realize that we were colonialists controlling orthodoxy through our ethnographies. It is equally difficult to be the reviewer of reflections on ethnographies, knowing that one's own interests and theoretical persuasions color perceptions of what is to be included in a selective review.

Ethnography has been, and is, the *sine qua non* of cultural anthropology. It accounts for our initial status and networks within our profession, legitimizes us as

"real" anthropologists, establishes us as those who can endure an often lengthy rite of passage, and provides us with the means to survive the publishing dictates of the academy. While it is all right to challenge ourselves with reflexivity, it can be quite threatening when those we study provide criticism, often unwanted, of that which defines us as professionals. It is such criticism, and the ethical implications engendered, that Brettell and her contributors confront in a book that might have been better subtitled "The Politics and Ethics of Ethnography."

Brettell's book is divided into four sections ("Contested Texts," "Politicized Texts," "Mediated Texts," and "Collaborative Texts") preceded by an introduction. Each of the contributors discusses a book or article that raised a furor—usually among consultants, but also, in one case, an internal anguish about what should not be published. Each contributor considers misunderstandings, publication and rapport, continued fieldwork possibilities after initial publication, and the moral and ethical dilemmas anthropologists face in the attempt to render the Other intelligible and fairly.

Dona L. Davis's "Unintended Consequences: The Myth of 'The Return' in Anthropological Fieldwork," sounds a theme echoed by several others in each of the books: "the veracity of my or their statements was not challenged" (p. 31). The challenges come from other quarters: anonymity and people's post hoc attributions of who said what, negative opinions by those who had not read her book, being the subject of a rumor mill with virtually



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Africanisms in American Culture by Joseph E. Holloway; D. C. Hine; J. McCluskey, Jr.; D. B. Gaspar

J. Lorand Matory

American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 93, No. 2. (Jun., 1991), pp. 489-490.

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This book, which largely represents the Indian tradition in applied anthropology, is appropriately dedicated to honor the contributions of B. K. Roy Burman, the doyen of Indian rural social science and anthropology today. Roy Burman was deeply influenced in his early life by the writings of S. C. Roy and was later trained in anthropology by N. K. Bose and T. C. Das. He is considered one of the few Indian anthropologists who "refused to allow their professional vision to be coloured entirely by western thought" (p. 19). Noted for his empirical awareness and methodological rigor, Roy Burman maintained a humanistic approach to social issues in India. He carried out many studies among villagers and hill people under the aegis of the Census Commission of India. One of his foremost academic and professional commitments concerns tribals and their social formations. Roy Burman founded the Institute of People's Action in 1977 to actively involve Manipuri tribals in the process of development and research.

The 42 papers in this volume, written by his friends and colleagues, are twined around the role of social science in delineating and solving social problems, as the title indicates. The epilogue contains a fairly long interview with Roy Burman focusing his thoughts and views on the future of Indian and world anthropology. The editor, S. B. Chakrabarti, instead of providing a particular theme for the volume, asked the contributors "to pick up some issues where Roy Burman had at least done some thinking" (p. xii). As a result, it turned out that three very important elements of Roy Burman's professional concern, namely, tribal studies, participatory development, and multidisciplinary research, became the strongest common threads uniting all essays in this collection within a single social-applied framework. The first three papers, by L. K. Mahapatra, Bhupinder Singh, and Ajit Danda, depict a profile of Roy Burman and his works both as a social scientist and a humanist. The authors, in addition to discussing their personal encounters with and stories about Roy

Burman, systematically critique the scholarly activism for which he is widely known.

Eleven essays examine a variety of topics highlighting the tribal issues and contemporary developments in India. It is encouraging to find a significant shift in approach to tribal studies from a more conventional framework (i.e., transformation of tribes into peasants and caste-groups founded by Risley, Bose, and Srinivas) to a political economy approach. This shift is best illustrated in the article by Jaganath Pathy. Tribal issues like land and resource control are inextricably intertwined with the Indian political economy. As Pathy puts it: "The land problems of the tribals cannot be comprehended in isolation from the dominant economy, politics and ideology of India" (p. 44). Nine articles focus on "participatory development" in rural India and the need for "empowerment" of the people. Eight articles are devoted to analyzing caste practices, ethnicity, and nationalism. Roy Burman's own views on ethnicity and tribal national movements are not reviewed adequately in this volume; he categorized tribal movements in northeastern India as "proto-nationalistic"—a phase of expansion of identity that is not necessarily incompatible with "official nationalism" (p. 225). Several articles examine urban/industrial policies and social changes. The book integrates reasonably well various development issues and social concerns as reflected in anthropological research and studies in India.

The epilogue should be interesting to readers. It provides a broad overview of Roy Burman's interests in anthropological practices, both in an Indian context and globally. His concern about indigenous peoples worldwide and the need for multidisciplinary research are relevant themes in contemporary anthropology. Roy Burman considers that the future of anthropology lies in the systematic and continuous study of "human needs," "freedom," and "quality of life" in cross-cultural perspective. This book is a welcome addition to the literature of applied social sciences and may be used as a reader in developmental and applied anthropology courses.

General/Theoretical Anthropology

Africanisms in American Culture. *Joseph E. Holloway*, ed. Blacks in the Diaspora (*D. C. Hine, J. McCluskey, Jr., and D. B. Gaspar*, general eds.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. 272 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

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Written chiefly by African-American scholars, this volume is itself a landmark in an emerging historical consciousness, abandoning the fearful and once-popular sense that any sign of Africanness fueled the argument that African-Americans were unassimilable as citizens. At the same time, the best of these essays admirably revise the much-criticized eth-

nohistorical method of Melville J. Herskovits, to whom the volume is devoted.

It remains difficult to say whether the need to resurrect Herskovits's efforts flows from past political motives or from the paucity of evidence for the "Africanisms" thesis as it is conventionally posed. In this volume, many instances of African "survivals" in North America are drawn from the distant past and from isolated regions like the Georgia Sea Coast Islands. Moreover, because they participate in a highly creolized North American culture, the Africanness of such "survivals" is evident only when they are abstracted from North America and interpolated into the elaborate ritual systems of Haiti, for example. Hence, some of these essays seem an archeology of shreds and patches, neglecting their relation to the peculiar internal dynamics of North American society.

Certain essays tendentiously assign African origins to widespread behaviors and feelings. In his "Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture," R. F. Thompson claims that the Kongo gesture of crossing the arms provided the historical model for a Black man in 1980 who, on the New Haven green, crossed his arms to end a conversation (p. 158). Other essays show an inadequate knowledge of the African ethnography. For example, Holloway attributes to "the Bantus . . . a homogeneous culture," adding, "This homogeneity is indicated by a common language" (p. 8). Several essays also uncritically repeat the shibboleth that African-American *shouting*—being filled with the Holy Ghost—is cognate with West African, Haitian, and Brazilian spirit possession. Though partly convincing, the comparison remains questionable on several counts: (1) outside the Christian churches, possession by the High God is virtually anathema in Africa; (2) untranslatable glossolalia and the conventional violence of North American *shouting* distinguish it sharply from most West African and Afro-Latin spirit possession, which mimes the personalities of gods, enlists comprehensible languages, and, unlike *shouting*, entails the medium's amnesia; and (3) perhaps more obvious precedents are found in the church at Corinth and the English Civil War sects.

Some North American religious, aesthetic, and social conventions indeed manifest not only African "survivals" but distinctly African structural templates—a point scored excitingly in Maultsby's "Africanisms in African-American Music." The author reviews the standard improvisation-and-polyrhythm argument and beautifully illustrates patterns of performer-audience interaction recogniz-

able on both continents, as well as the American aesthetic and political concerns that have generated innovation. Despite the self-evident strength of the case for "Africanisms" in "Sacrificial Practices in Santeria, an African-Cuban Religion in the United States," Brandon sensitively outlines the influences of non-African religions, the class contexts of their convergence, and the dynamics of revitalization and cross-ethnic diffusion as well.

Concluding this volume is Philips's exceptional article, "The African Heritage of White America," which subverts some of the dearest assumptions of the Herskovitsian method. Philips argues that the distinguishing features of African-American culture owe more to class conditions than to African descent and that "Africanisms" are, most importantly, what distinguishes the American culture at large from the European. Although class analysis cannot account for the full range of African-American cultural distinctiveness, this essay and others arm us with a rich array of historical and ethnographic materials, while enhancing our means to revise both unilineal visions of American cultural development and outmoded assumptions about the nature of cultural continuity in general.

The Cultural Context of Aging: World-wide Perspectives. Jay Sokolovsky, ed. New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1990. 416 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

MARCIE PARKER
University of Minnesota

The Cultural Context of Aging is an important new contribution to the field of anthropology and aging. The book is well conceived and crafted. It is divided into six sections: "Culture, Aging, and Context"; "The Cultural Construction of Intergenerational Ties"; "Aging, Modernization, and Societal Transformation"; "The Ethnic Dimension in Aging"; "Community, Environment, and Aging"; and "Culture, Health, and Aging." The goals of the book are to show "how older adults function as social actors in the context of diverse societies and . . . how the cultural context in which people grow old creates a varied reality of what aging means" (p. 1). The book shows how social groups construct shared expectations about aging and uses the notions of time, the life cycle, intergenerational relations, dependency, and death (p. 2).

This book helps us understand how the aging experience in the United States compares with that in other cultures and it suggests



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

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

J. Lorand Matory

Journal of Religion in Africa, Vol. 23, Fasc. 2. (May, 1993), pp. 175-180.

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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 control 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 politico-religious 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 politico-religious 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 politico-religious 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