

REVIEW ARTICLE

NEW ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR  
HISTORIANS?

BY NANCY ROSE HUNT

*University of Michigan*

*Bodies and Persons : Comparative Perspectives from Africa and Melanesia*. Edited by MICHAEL LAMBEK and ANDREW STRATHERN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xiv + 298. £45 (ISBN 0-521-62194-1); £15.95 paperback (ISBN 0-521-62737-0).

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IN an era when academic fashion has many attacking binary formulations as inherently distorting and Eurocentric, this anthropological collection seeks to salvage mind/body and gender/sex distinctions not as universal opposites, but as existentially incommensurable domains. Why else might historians of Africa want to read this demanding book? The simple answer is to know what anthropologists are up to, the kinds of theoretical questions they are posing and the practices that they are studying. The more complicated answer is that *Bodies and Persons* has something to tell us about the history – and perhaps the future – of anthropological writing in and outside Africa. The selection of Africanist work included here opens up puzzling and undigested terrain about differences between anglophone and francophone Africanist anthropology, and about the use and potential of psychoanalytic approaches manifest in the latter.

What is given to us for Africa is work from central and eastern Africa: two essays on Congolese therapeutic cults of affliction by Ellen Corin and René Devisch; two by Malagasy specialists (one by Michael Lambek on a spirit medium in the guise of a French sailor; one by Rita Astuti, who uses contrasting forms of identity to compare Austronesian and African ethnographic concerns); one by Brad Weiss on blood-stealing rumors among the Haya in Tanzania; and a critical commentary by Janice Boddy, which also explores differences between Sudanese and Somali female body-marking. Also included are an introduction by the editors and five essays by Melanesianists; one of these uses Sharon Hutchinson's historical anthropology of the Nuer<sup>1</sup> as a model and is, perhaps as a result, the most solidly historical piece in the collection.

For a historian's sensibilities, most of the Africanist essays seem either too flat in their thickly embodied descriptions or too self-conscious about situating their intellectual locations. Corin and Devisch give tiny hints as to how therapeutic religious forms emerged or changed in the colonial and post-colonial periods in Congo-Kinshasa, yet the processual nature of ritual – not the history of an idiom or of the use and meanings of sculpted *colon*-like figurines, for example – is their interest. Weiss is the only Africanist explicitly to engage the work of a historian as part of his problematic. His evidence signals the need to further probe how *mutumbula* rumors changed in relation to the histories of hospitals, blood transfusions, electricity, mobility and transnational road travel.

<sup>1</sup> Sharon E. Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas : Coping with Money, War, and the State* (Berkeley, 1996).

This book suggests that the disciplines of anthropology and history are not growing any closer together in African studies, even if they may be taking simultaneous turns toward the body, desire, mimesis and perhaps even Lacanian theory. Although some essays press for insights into the ethnographic present – or recent past – as history and politics, the emphasis falls more on elaborate exegesis, theoretical positioning, and philosophical reflection. One backdrop contention is that Africanists have been more oriented toward political economy than Melanesianists. In this volume, however, the Melanesianists seem to be more interested than the Africanists – with the exception of Brad Weiss – in the present as a historically situated moment.

The purpose of comparison here is not objective or classificatory; ultimately, it is for the exchange of ideas across two regional ethnographic traditions. The book traces a genealogy of exchange between these two milieux. Melanesianists and Africanists first entered a comparative mode when Anglophone anthropological debates over ‘descent groups’ moved from Africa – with Evans-Pritchard’s work on the Nuer – to Melanesia in the 1960s. Since that time, Melanesianists work moved first, by negation, from descent to exchange (as the principle underlying Melanesian sociality), and then to personhood and gender via Marilyn Strathern’s book, *The Gender of the Gift*.<sup>2</sup> *Bodies and Persons* suggests that fully to grasp recent Africanist anthropology – à la Sharon Hutchinson and Brad Weiss – one needs to know that ‘Africa in the ethnographies of the 1990s looks much more like Melanesia ... than it did in the 1960s’ (p. 251). Thus, Africanist anthropologists, so the volume’s central narrative goes, are analyzing gender and personhood now too, while using phenomenology and practice theory (Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu) to do so. Whereas in the 1960s, social anthropologists tended to compare group structures, now no one is sure what to compare with what, the editors frankly admit, while proposing that the body may be a handy new ‘analytical “stretcher term”’ (p. 4) that will renew exchange across these two sub-fields.

The book’s first part, “‘Transcending dichotomies’”, features a philosophical essay by Lambek where he argues that a mind/body distinction is not just some peculiar western obsession with binary opposites, but rather that this is a distinction which however variable is part of humankind’s existential condition. Rita Astuti extends this argument by considering why Vezo care to ask about the sex of a newborn, when Vezo become gendered only through practice and embodiment. Contesting the likes of Judith Butler, she argues that we may need to reclaim the sex/gender dichotomy not as biology/culture, but to encapsulate a prominent (at least Vezo) theme about personhood – that of malleability and fixity, negotiability and intractability, the living and the dead. To make this unresolvable tension between sex and gender (or flesh and image) clearer, Astuti compares newborns to *sarin’ampela*, Vezo men who become female or ‘images of women’, yet whose corpses are buried as male bodies alongside those of men.

Michael Lambek does not tell us what the implications of his insistence on an incommensurable mind/body pair are for the value of psychoanalytic approaches in anthropology. Instead, the collection leaves readers with a puzzle about the intentions of the editors in selecting the Africanist essays. Are the works of Astuti, Boddy, Corin, Devisch, Lambek and Weiss (and the virtual presence of Sharon Hutchinson’s) meant to be representative, the state-of-the-art or an eclectic hodge-podge? Only in the Africanist essays do we find a turning to a psychoanalytic vocabulary to understand therapeutic ritual as a means of individuation (in the case of Corin) and as a form of fantasy and specular embodiment and identification (in the case of Devisch). Are these psychoanalytic approaches just a passing

<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley, 1988).

francophone-derived (or Belgian ex-colonial) peculiarity? Or, are the editors suggesting that this attention to mimesis, identification and individuation should become part of future Africanist and Melanesianist exchange? Or, perhaps they are trying to draw one contrast between the structural and the processual and another between balanced and imbalanced embodiment.

Ultimately, the book traces two genealogies. One, the development of Melanesianist work in relation to Africanist work, is strongly etched in by the editors and echoed by several essayists. The second is brimming with the very selection of Africanist contributors complicated by a brief lineage authored by Ellen Corin. The first genealogy concerns anglophone anthropology; the second moves between francophone and Africanist work. French Africanists did not enter debates over jural notions of descent theory. They also revisited Mauss on personhood much earlier and through seeking African principles of individuation; and some of them developed the Dakar school of psychoanalysis focused on African 'psychopathologies', as their journal's title still attests. Only Corin tries to place her work in relation to this lineage, though (writing from Quebec) she reshapes the anglophone/francophone contrast into a continental one, juxtaposing a European interest in Mauss, categories of persons, and individuation, with a North American concern with empathy, lived worlds and concrete interactions. The category of 'individuation', for Corin, refers not to any particular subjective experience, but rather to the structural possibility of distancing *vis-à-vis* defining power; thus it requires identifying spaces – like Zebola – where 'the cultural coordinates of the person are made explicit' (p. 84). Using the structuralist *langue/parole* pair as manifest in early writings of Lacan, she analyzes how Zebola 'releases and articulates a potential for individuation and sustains a position of subject' (p. 89). The ritual is also analyzed as a structure, a set of inversions that unfold through time, while the narrative expression of identity within it strengthens a subject's sense of self.

Such narrativization is one example of what Lambek calls objectification, a word that should not be confused with reification. Without corresponding attention to objectification, Lambek argues, embodiment can go too far ('the body' must be balanced by 'the mind'). He pauses, therefore, in the face of Devisch's essay on Yaka embodiment as unreflected, pre-symbolic mimesis. Devisch's semantic, practice-oriented, and psychoanalytic approach privileges the 'imaginary register, as distinct from representation or reflection' (p. 143); he even states that Yaka culture 'has barely evolved a cognitive technology of "re-representation" or of distancing in relation to bodily experience and habitus' (p. 10).

Janice Boddy finesses more easily Devisch's reading of therapeutic efficacy achieved through sensory process and specular identification, though she too seems to prefer Ellen Corin's approach to the kinds of individuation (as distinct from individualization) achieved in Zebola practice in Kinshasa. A distinction between body and mind, Boddy argues, is not just important analytically but therapeutically. Contrasting the self-mastery that leads to denial of body and sensation in young western women with *anorexia nervosa* with Sudanese women ailing from the overembodiment of imperfect fertility, she maintains that a capacity to keep a healthy distance between mind and body is good for women's health. Indeed, such a capacity is what spirit possession in the Zar cult enables.

Thus, cults of affliction and spirit mediumship are not technologies of the body alone, but also technologies of selves – selves with thoughts and minds, selves who objectify. Yet has 'the desire to be modern' – a topic raised in Edward Lipuma's chapter and magnificently complicated in Bruce Knauft's – effected a shift in these ritual technologies from individuated to individualized selves, from embodied mimesis to a more self-conscious, self-reflexive, colonial-wrought counter-mimesis? Ultimately these questions (not unlike Corin's taste for structure

and Lacanian readings of therapeutic ritual) are left by Lambek and Boddy as puzzles to take on another time.

This important and difficult book has made this reader want to understand such riddles better – and not out of idle curiosity. Psychoanalytic approaches are a part of a history of Africanist anthropology that needs to be written, and this history will have implications for how we write histories of cults of affliction as well as the history of their disciplining within the human sciences.