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find the resonance of women and men resisting control, speaking their own language.

Endnotes


3 p. 185; Fighting Back. Cuoto, "The Memory of Miners."


5 p. 264; Fighting Back. Anglin, "Engendering the Struggle: Women’s Labor and Traditions of Resistance in Rural Southern Appalachia."

6 In light of the previous critique of Colonialism in Modern America, it is important to note that Helen Lewis, Sue Kobak, and Linda Johnson addressed many of these issues in their essay from the volume, "Family, Religion, and Colonialism in Central Appalachia."

7 p. 273; Fighting Back. Anglin, "Engendering the Struggle."


9 p. 87; Fighting Back. Allen, "Save Our Cumberland Mountains."

10 p. 290; Fighting Back. Banks, Billings, Tice, "Appalachian Studies."


12 p. 257; Fighting Back. Guy and Candie Carawan, "Sowing on the Mountain."

13 Blacks in Appalachia, edited by William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985) does an excellent job in addressing these issues. As Cabbell notes in "Black Invisibility and Racism in Appalachia," one out of every fourteen Appalachians (or 1.6 million people) is black. See also, Black


14 p. 63; Fighting Back. Manning-Miller, "Racism and Organizing."

Weaving the Threads of Life: The Khita Gyn-Eco-Logical Healing Cult Among the Yaka

Rene Devisch
University of Chicago Press, 1993

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Galvanized by the increasing popularity of Foucault’s work on disciplining regimes and sexuality, theoretical interest in the ‘body’ as a site of inquiry and analysis exploded in the decade of the ’80s. In the ’90s the trend continues, although in some disciplines, anthropology included, our focus has shifted from an emphasis on the body as a template for the cultural inscription of meaning, to the empirical elaboration of the corporeal body as generative of meaning.

In anthropology, this movement has been paralleled by another, homologous shift. Re-vamped in its latest incarnation with a healthy dose of practice theory (usually Bourdieu’s version), performance theory gained new popularity in cultural and symbolic studies in the early ’90s. The homology is found in the new theories of ‘embodiment’ that now seem to be resulting from this union. Leading theorists of embodiment, such as the anthropologist Michael Jackson, have thus noted that a theory of practice and the performance of ritual, for example, must be grounded in the socially informed body.

Rene Devisch’s book, Weaving the Threads of Life: The Khita Gyn-Eco-Logical Healing Cult Among the Yaka (1993), is the most sophisticated, if not the very latest, installment in the anthropological embodiment literature. In it, Devisch presents an empirical account (based on extensive participant-observation) of the
Khita healing cult, one of the central ritualistic cults practiced by the Yaka of southwest Zaire. One among some twenty cults, Khita is responsible for redressing and healing gynecological problems, such as infertility and miscarriage, among Yaka women.

Yaka social organization revolves around a doubly unilineal, but asymmetrical system of descent. To emphasize the asymmetry, Devisch uses the terms "uterine filiation" and "agnatic descent" (14). Uterine filiation supplies the individual with good health, vitality, blood or life force—capacities passed on through the maternal line. It is reckoned across a span of from two to four generations. Agnatic descent is reckoned more distantly and supplies one with membership in a particular segmentary patrilineage and with social identity. Upon marriage, a Yaka woman will go to live in her husband's (her father-in-law's) compound. When born, her children will become part of her husband's patrilineage (from whence they will gain their social identity), but she will provide them with their health and lifeblood.

Conflicts arise when a Yaka woman proves to have trouble producing healthy children. Her husband and the elder members of his patrilineage are gravely concerned, as it is from her fertility that the next generation of the patrilineage must come. In such cases, ensorcellment is always suspected, and the source of the wrong-doing is always sought somewhere back in her line of uterine filiation, not in the patrilineage. Most usually, the source of the problem is proven to be a maternal uncle within 2-3 generations of the woman, who, by curse, sorcery or theft, brought misfortune (possibly death or sickness) to one of her female ancestors. The woman who becomes a patient and initiate of the Khita healing cult thus has inherited an "imbalance" in her maternal lifeblood from a previous uterine relative. This prevents her from passing the maternal lifesource on to her own children.

The Yaka conceive of this type of fertility problem as a kind of spirit possession. The Khita spirit that afflicts the patient has been released by the wrong-doing of one of her maternal uncles. To turn the spirit out of her body, name it and acquire control over it as an initiate in the Khita cult, the patient must submit to a complex ritual healing staged by a (male) healer with the help of one of her maternal uncles, her affines, and a Khita co-initiate who is one of her classificatory sisters (and therefore subject to the same affliction upon marriage). It is this process of trance, seclusion, and rebirth that Devisch studies in all its complexity.

Although the subject matter of this book seems at first glance 'traditionally anthropological' and possibly obscure, Devisch's theoretical and methodological approach to the problem of spirit possession and ritual healing is highly innovative and will be of importance to anyone interested in work on the body. Devisch is creative and highly mercenary in his theoretical borrowing. He has little concern for disciplinary boundaries, his approach being "selectively in line with" (38) Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Levi-Strauss' structuralism, Kristeva's structur-alist semiotics, Bourdieu's poststructuralism, and Kapferer's processual performance theory. Devisch also makes good use of Lacan's notion of the imaginary register in his account.

Devisch combines these disparate elements with his own unique insight into the generative potential of the human body, producing what he has coined a "semantic-praxiological" approach to the study of ritual healing. This method involves three distinct angles of approach. The first angle is the elaboration of the internal structure of the ritual activity and how disparate 'devices' are patterned into a ritual process. This angle would include the study of ritual vocabulary as well as temporal shifts in the composition of the participants in the rites, for example. The second angle involves discovering how the different elements of the ritual drama are related paradigmatically to other contexts extant in Yaka life. Thus the elements, acts, objects that occur in the rite are compared with analogous phenomena in daily life. The third angle involves examining the interactive fields of body, family and life-world to try and discover how "a meaningful and empowering drama is brought about" (42). This angle deals with the efficacy of ritual, in other words, or how a healing transformation is actually induced in the Khita patient.

Although this 'bare-bones' description of his semantic-praxiological approach may not sound innovative at first glance, Devisch's analysis of the Khita healing rite is truly unorthodox and adds new insight to studies of the body as generative of meaning. As Devisch notes,

I am concerned here with the ways in which a culture shapes experience that is not only inspired by the body but also lived and mediated by it and through it. The body is both source and agent, embodiedness and embodiment. I look at ritual as a praxis that produces meaning and power in and through bodily action enhanced and reinforced with images, metaphors, and forces, all enacted and orchestrated in an unfolding drama.

In ritual, corporeal praxis thus shapes, expresses, and re-embodies a particular bodily and social order, and a particular view of, and relation with, the lifeworld or cosmos. (46)
It is the centrality of the body as 'both source and agent' in Devisch's analysis of ritual process that takes his approach beyond others, such as the classic social and dramaturgical work of Victor Turner and the interpretive work of Clifford Geertz.

Devisch's focus gives him new insight into how culture is generated and re-generated as a weave. Indeed, both his writing style and the structure of the book reproduce paradigmatically the Yaka means and method of continuously reweaving the lifeworld. The Prologue and Chapter 1, "Field and Method," introduce the study, the Yaka, and provide an in-depth description of Devisch's theoretical and methodological approach. As it is difficult to understand what his claims and approach really mean until one has completed the book, Chapter 1 should probably be read again afterwards.

Chapters 2-5 elaborate Yaka cosmology in minute detail over a number of different topical areas, such as gender cosmology and illness beliefs. These chapters are dense, but provide a wealth of information on worldview applying to a number of different groups in Zaire and surrounding Bantu areas. Although tedious at times in their detail, if these chapters are not read attentively, one cannot really understand the nature of the Yaka lifeweave Devisch is trying to illustrate.

Chapters 6 and 7 describe the Khita fertility cult and the rite by which the patient is transformed, healed and reintegrated into the family group and life-world. These chapters are especially important, as they illustrate the means and circumstances by which the body acts as source and agent in the generation of Yaka cosmology. The second half of Chapter 7 includes a detailed critique of Turner's analysis of Ndembu ritual. Thus, Devisch also supplies us with a valuable critique of dramaturgy and the dangers of analyzing (especially preliterate) cultures as text.

Chapter 8, "The Body as the Weaving Loom of Healing and Life," brings all of the information together in an almost revelatory way that mirrors the Khita initiate's experience of the weaving of body, kin and life-world in the context of the healing rite. In this chapter, Devisch elaborates how,

Healing operates through the body as the basic deposit and embodiment of cultural traditions. In an untutored or spontaneous way, these traditions come to articulation, in and through the body, with the community and the life-world. And through feeling and sensing out the meaning of the embodied interwoveness with the kin and life-world, the body is deeply moved, intensified, and remolded. (255)

Devisch's approach does have a number of things in common with those of other embodiment theorists in anthropology. For example, like Thomas Csordas and Michael Jackson, he attempts to combine a phenomenological approach to the body with various aspects of practice and performance theory. In addition, he has chosen a typical study topic for the illustration of embodiment: religious or ritual healing and/or spirit possession. Unfortunately, he also propagates a problem with definitions that has plagued embodiment approaches for a number of years: What is, or what do the theorists mean by their notion of 'embodiment'? Like many before him, Devisch never defines embodiment. That he takes this term for granted is evidenced by its absence from the index of his book, although he uses the term repeatedly. This would be my greatest criticism of what is otherwise a brilliant work: terms such as "embodiment" and "cosmogenetic" are never defined, although they are central aspects of his thesis. Instead we are left to realize their meanings through the course of realizing exactly what Devisch is trying to say.

Most important among his contributions, however, is his collapsing of the mind-body dualism that continues to plague social theory in general, and studies of the body in particular. The very structure of Devisch's analytical approach to the body as both source and agent of meaning negates any possibility that this dichotomy should exist. In this way, Devisch finally achieves what other theorists of embodiment have been promising for sometime, but have as yet not realized in their work. Devisch shows us that an analytical focus on the process of embodiment can collapse all traditional dualities, the mind-body duality in particular.