
Once again the anthropologist as diviner shakes up the ethnographic basket and finds truths in it suited to the needs of the day. The overall message of this book might be called the Zen theory of divination, that is, that its procedures dislodge the mind from its usual grooves and open it to new perspectives. Divination is thus creative and adaptive. This was what Victor Turner used to say about ritual, but he did not care much for divination, which he saw as part of societas, divisive and alienating. According to Peek (p. 3), African divination systems involve a combination of ‘logical-analytical’ and ‘intuitive-synthetical’ modes of thinking, ‘while in the European tradition the separation of these modes is rigidly maintained.’ Well, in some theoretical schemes, such as Turner’s, this assertion is true, but it certainly doesn’t describe the reality of European practice nor even the generality of doctrine.

So what is the point? The book implies a super-functional image of a homogeneous, ideally adjusted communitas equipped with a satisfying and effective body of ‘knowledge.’ Not surprisingly, the only challenge to this picture comes from the women contributors, Rosalind Shaw (writing on the Temne) and Susan Reynolds White (on Nyole). Both are interested in the play of power in divination. Shaw is correct in her suggestion that ‘intellectualist’ (dichotomizing, true/false) analyses are to be expected in legalistic contexts, whereas ‘a concept of truth as a potent paraverbal enigma’ is more likely when judgments and politics are not at issue. Public divination among the Temne is highly analytical, and is monopolized by senior men; in contrast, the revelatory use of ambiguous statements and innuendoes is characteristic of private divination, addressed to the concerns of women. Or, as Whyte puts it, divination is a special tool for shaping the power component in social relations (p. 170); that, in effect, is what Turner said about it.

Shaw’s observation also applies to this book: assertions to the effect that ‘we separate, they integrate’ are ideological, not ethnographic. Peek quotes G. P. Murdock’s assertion that divination is found in every culture, but does not test his generalizations against any of the forms of divination to be found in Western society. ‘All divination forms,’ he asserts (p. 12), ‘involve a non-
normal state of inquiry which then requires a "rational" interpretation of the revealed information by the client, if not by the divine. Thus... both "analytical" and "revelatory" dimensions are present" (p. 12). Is a Wall Street expert attempting to chart and predict the movements of that occult entity, 'the market', engaged in a non-normal state of inquiry? Who says what is 'non-normal'?

Peek fashionably bashes positivism, holding it responsible for a view of African peoples as gullible and irrational; careful study shows, however, that 'divination practitioners exhibit an intense need to know the true reasons for events, a highly skeptical and pragmatic attitude toward all types of information, and a persistent concern with adjusting to change' (p. 194). How much better is this as a generalization? Does it describe any but the kind of diviner that an anthropologist is most happy to 'discover' and convert into a prized informant? Not only positivists but Africans are often concerned about incompetent and fraudulent diviners. A distinguished African intellectual once privately deplored anthropologists' excessive charity towards diviners and healers, who may be responsible for directing their clients away from potentially effective therapies. Diviners are often the best source of advice, but beside the one who tells a woman she has tuberculosis and should go back to the hospital there is another who encourages a family to accuse a neighbor of witchcraft instead of including more protein in the diet of a child dying of malnutrition. One should not lose sight of such questions in the romance of alternative 'ways of knowing'.

Since 'analytical' and 'intuitive' are, at best, loaded terms with little empirical use, it would make sense to abandon them; their retention suggests a deliberate ethnocentrism, one more covert effort to use the ethnography of others to stake out a position at home. Along the way, however, the reader encounters some good ethnography demonstrating the enormous variety of divination beliefs and practices in Africa. The book begins by reprinting Henry Callaway's classic account of the initiation of a Zulu diviner. Several contributors pay attention to the ways in which the collaboration between diviner and client helps to make the findings seem authoritative. Other themes include the many forms of marginality characteristic of diviners, and the cosmological premises of divination; as R. Devisch puts it (p. 130), 'Neither oracles nor rites prove their veracity by discursive reasoning; rather this veracity stems from linking up the problem situation to an