REVIEWS


Robin Horton's collection of essays offers something to offend everyone. Highly iconoclastic, and frequently idiosyncratic, some thirty years of Professor Horton's thinking on thought in 'Africa' and 'the West' is presented in a comprehensive fashion. Readers of these papers may find themselves occasionally railing against Horton's perspective (particularly his own critics, whom he rails against), but often rewarded with some trenchant observations about the pitfalls of much anthropological theorizing on religion in Africa and elsewhere.

Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West offers nine major theoretical essays written between 1960 and 1987, plus an Introduction and Postscript to the collection. Eight of the papers were published previously; the ninth is an expanded version of the 1987 Frazer Lecture. The collection is divided into two principal sections, whose pithy titles 'Mainly Critical' and 'Mainly Constructive,' ably capture their content and (especially) their tone. The chronological scope of this volume allows the reader to appreciate the development of Professor Horton's approach to the comparative study of systems of thought. We see his response to the challenges of his critics, responses which include the revision, clarification, and even rejection of ideas that he no longer finds satisfactory. On the whole, however, Horton holds his ground, and remains unpersuaded of the virtues of alternatives to his position.

Horton's dissatisfaction with prevailing interpretive frameworks for assessing African religious thought (which he labels 'Symbolist' and 'Theological') lead him to propose an avowedly Intellectualist perspective. One of the premises of this perspective is the insistence that there is nothing unique or novel about religious systems of thought, African or otherwise, but, rather, that these are examples of a much more general, indeed universal, cognitive capacity. Given such a premise, Horton turns necessarily to a comparison of thought systems in Africa and the West in order both to demonstrate the underlying continuity between these systems, and to describe and account for the apparent differences between them. His analyses, then, concern not only the common intellectual foundations of African and Western thought systems, but also
the transformation, and, indeed, evolution of what might be called different cognitive orientations.

The cornerstone concept of Horton's Intellectualism, as derived in broad outline from Tylor and Frazer, is that magic, religion, and science can all be characterized as bodies of theory designed for the 'explanation/prediction/control' of events in the world. It is this fundamental 'goal' that constitutes the 'common core' of human rationality at all times and in all places. This focus on these cognitive concerns leads Horton to devote the preponderance of his analysis to the question of 'theory building.' How, asks Horton, can we account for the construction of different explanatory theories, in both intellectual and sociological terms? Cognitive processes he asserts, consist of a relationship between two distinct kinds of theories: 'Primary theory' defines the everyday world of common sense, objects, events, and persons. Its objects are experienced as directly given. 'Secondary theory' posits an order of 'unseen' forces that provide the intellectual resources for demonstrating that there is an organization and regularity underlying the apparent disorder of everyday experience. All such 'secondary theories' attempt both to explain the ordinary experiences of everyday life, but must also rely on that primary level of theory, drawing its systematic models by analogy with those features of commonsense experience most often associated with order and regularity. Since, according to Horton, 'primary theory' is more or less the same universally, but the domains of experience associated with order and systematicity vary from culture to culture, 'secondary theory' can be seen as both grounded in a universal rationality, but subject to variation relative to the social contexts of ordinary experience from which its analogies are drawn.

These dual-dimensions of theory building provide, to Horton's mind, both the intellectualist foundations as well as the sociological variability of all explanatory ideas, from the 'wavicles' of quantum physics, to Water-Spirits in Kalabari possession cults. He elaborates on the implications of this cognitive model most directly, developing his ideas about both the intellectual and sociological sides of his equation, in the papers described as 'Mainly Constructive.' The two most important essays in this section, and indeed, the entire volume, 'African traditional thought and Western science' ('ATWS') and 'Tradition and modernity revisited' ('TMR') are companion pieces, the latter Horton's response to criticisms, and reevaluation of the former effort some fifteen years after its initial publication. In 'ATWS,' Horton argues that 'explanatory theory' must be clearly differentiated from 'common sense,' or 'everyday discourse,' as all theory departs from commonplace experience in an effort