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## Review of Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*

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## Review of Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*

### **Abstract**

The ten essays that comprise this volume deal with the ritual symbols of the Ndembu people of Zambia, south-central Africa. All except one were previously published within the last ten years. Most of them excel in analytical rigor, detailed ethnographic description, and provide stimulating theoretical suggestions. Now that these essays have been assembled in a single volume, Victor Turner's approach emerges as a fruitful research method. It could well be one of the most significant contributions any anthropologist has made to folklore studies in the past decade.

### **Disciplines**

African History | African Languages and Societies | Cultural History | Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History

especially important. Bausinger's book is an invaluable textbook for folklorists. An English translation seems indispensable.

The second compendium is a fascicle, part 2 of volume 5 in the ballad collection of the great edition of German folksongs with their melodies. This volume has now been completed after a hiatus of eight years. It contains mainly songs of a tragic, family nature. The Deutsche Volksliedarchiv is in the process of editing all songs of German folk tradition, after the example of Child, but with the apparatus of text and music, prolific bibliographies of continental analogues, and taped phonetic transcriptions of dialectal variants. This work is what the Child edition might have become had our Harvard professor directed his project in the twentieth century with a group of scholars under the financial auspices of the Archives of American Folklore and the help of other federal funds. I cannot imagine a more careful, complete, and definite work. The treatment of one important ballad may be seen as an example of German *Gründlichkeit*. The song "Die Rabenmutter" extends over twenty-five pages and seven versions (five with musical notations, two in phonetic transcription from tape recordings, with translation). The bibliography of German sources includes Switzerland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Poland, Estonia, and Russia with their ethnic German communities. The foreign language sources are as extensive. Five pages cover the story of textual development, six pages that of the melodic development.

It is awe-inspiring to realize that tasks such as these are still undertaken and hopefully brought to a successful conclusion. Both works ought to prove a stimulant to our own endeavors.

THOMAS J. GARBÁTY

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*The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual.* By Victor Turner. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967. Pp. xii + 405. \$12.50)

The ten essays that comprise this volume deal with the ritual symbols of the Ndembu people of Zambia, south-central Africa. All except one were previously published within the last ten years. Most of them excel in analytical rigor, detailed ethnographic description, and provide stimulating theoretical suggestions. Now that these essays have been assembled in a single volume, Victor Turner's approach

emerges as a fruitful research method. It could well be one of the most significant contributions an anthropologist has made to folklore studies in the past decade.

Within the tradition of British social anthropology Turner conceives of ritual as any "formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to belief in mystical beings or powers." The symbol is the elementary unit for ritual analysis. It is "the smallest unit of ritual behavior which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context" (p. 19). Such a definition begs comparison with Thompson's description of motif as "the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition" (*The Folktale*, p. 415). In spite of the similarity there is a significant distinction. Thompson's motif is an analytical tool for comparative studies, while Turner's symbol is an ethnic unit within ritualistic contexts. His main focus is upon the analysis of the structure of Ndembu ritual symbols and their relationships within the context of particular rites.

According to Turner, the symbol has three major properties. The first, condensation, is the capacity of a single form to represent multiple things and actions. They are interconnected by virtue of their possession of a common or analogous quality or by factual or cognitive association. This mode of interconnection constitutes the second property: unification of disparate significata. Finally Turner recognizes two clusters of meanings: those pertaining to moral and social order, the ideological pole, and those related to natural and physical phenomena, the sensory pole, and hence he categorizes the third property of ritual symbols as the polarizations of meaning.

Perhaps the interpretation of meanings is the most controversial question in the study of symbols. Folklorists and anthropologists often seesaw between a positivistic exclusive reliance on the informants' verbal explications to a psychoanalytical deciphering of the unconscious significance of symbols. To avoid the pitfalls of either extreme approach, Turner suggests that we distinguish three levels of symbolic meaning. Accordingly the interpretation provided by the informant constitutes the exegetical meaning, the actual usage of symbolic objects forms their operational meaning, and their associations to other ritual symbols and cultural concepts constitute their positional meaning. By such a method it is possible to infer symbolic meanings of forms of which the informants are not consciously aware. Furthermore the actual analysis of ethnographic data clearly indicates

that the same symbols may have different meanings in distinct contexts. For example, the color black stands for evil and danger, but in the context of sexual relationships it expresses harmony and "coolness."

Following Kurt Lewin, Turner conceives of ritual as a "power field" in which social and political forces are at interplay. His article "*Mukanda: the Rite of Circumcision*," published here for the first time, is an example of an analysis of a ritual action and its relations to the wider social context.

In short *The Forest of Symbols* offers new challenges to folklore studies. Such a method of ritual analysis could and should be applied to other aspects of folklore as well. Folkloric expressions and actions by their very nature are formal and symbolic and hence amenable to similar research.

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*The Christmas of the Phonograph Records.* By Mari Sandoz. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966. Pp. 27. \$2.95)

*Rocky's Chuck Wagon Stories.* By Rocky Reagan. (San Antonio: Naylor Press, 1968. Pp. 160. \$3.95)

Mari Sandoz's tiny book is beautiful. It is a recollection of an incident from her frontier girlhood when her father blew nearly all of an inheritance on an Edison phonograph and a lavish supply of records, which were of course the old wax cylinder type. Criticized for not buying more worthwhile things, such as shoes for his poor children's feet, her father made this memorable reply: "Frozen feet heal! What you put in the mind lasts!" The Sandoz home became a mecca for people from miles around, and even Mr. Sandoz's bitterest enemy swallowed his pride and came around—and was invited in to hear the wonderful music.

All in all this very short reminiscence is a vivid reminder to us—with our stereos, our home libraries, our beautifully-reproduced works of art—of how eagerly grasped, how deeply treasured, were the bits of culture that did make their way to the frontier.

Rocky Reagan's book, on the other hand, is best described as routine. It is described on the dust jacket as "the very same stories he has told, time and again, to his children and grandchildren." One