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Human Development and Psychology

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Professor Victor Manfredi
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Boston University
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Dear Victor:

Thank you for an illuminating and thought-provoking talk at the seminar this afternoon. I want to apologize for leaving early; I had to deal with some urgent matters at home. I would be very interested in reading the full paper when that is available, so I could understand your approach and see the evidence you bring to bear in your argument.

Given my very incomplete knowledge of your methods and argument, it may be premature to comment, but I may as well do so while I'm still thinking about your talk. First, I want to emphasize my appreciation of the value of linguistic analysis to an anthropological understanding of any culture (including its rituals) and my belief that African studies has had too few linguistic studies aimed at cultural analysis. You and I might differ concerning what kinds of linguistic analyses would be most enlightening, but your talk made me think how different our knowledge of African cultures would be if linguistic anthropologists had done as much work there as social anthropologists of the structural-functional school. I think the same when I read Judith Irvine's sociolinguistic studies of the Wolof. We need more studies of language and language use, and we suffer without it.

Second, I have only skimmed the Ottenberg book, but I read Si's article on the same subject in *Ethos* a few years earlier, and I don't think his use of psychoanalytic interpretation can be taken seriously. That's why I didn't try to defend it at the seminar, despite my involvement in psychoanalytic anthropology. I think it's very hard to do, that Ottenberg underestimates what is required, that there are a few people who do it in a sophisticated and rigorous manner but none of them is an Africanist. Given the difficulties of valid depth interpretation, it is preferable to work at the level of conscious experience, where cultural categories and personal feelings are available to a phenomenological approach. Unfortunately, some anthropologists who embrace Freudian psychoanalysis have no idea what it would take to convince a skeptical colleague of their position through ethnographic data, so they don't even try. I'm afraid Si Ottenberg has become one of those.

I've always thought it quite plausible that in societies where young men are required to be warriors, there would be rituals dramatizing masculine virtues to prepare them for active participation in warfare, but as Frank Young pointed out years ago, this can be argued on Durkheimian grounds without turning to Freud. I find the oedipal interpretation a red herring. I liked your comments about how in African societies most people know the "secrets" long

before they're revealed to them in initiation rituals ("public secrets" are indeed prevalent in the African communities I've worked in), but the rituals may add emotional intensity to their pre-existing knowledge, and in warfare emotional intensity makes a difference.

Tambi wanted me to react to your statement that initiation rituals could not constitute a transition from childhood to adulthood among the Igbo because there is no childhood there. That's because he knows I've spent much of my life studying what I thought was childhood in Kenya and Nigeria, and through the publications of others, in the rest of the subsaharan region. I suppose I felt like you might feel were I to say that the Gusii (of Kenya) have no grammar since they don't have a word or a conceptual category for it.

You seemed to argue that since children participate in productive and other tasks with adults there is no distinct category of childhood *as conceptualized in the contemporary West*. I've never found a society in Africa or elsewhere in which parents weren't aware of the different physical and mental capacities of their offspring in the years between birth and maturity, and I doubt there is an African society in which there aren't age grades and age statuses marking off those years from those that follow. Furthermore, although children participate in domestically organized food and craft production in Africa, they don't have the same roles in the productive process as adults, and their transition to socially recognized maturity is often marked in ritual and in other ways.

Of course I might have misunderstood what you were claiming about childhood. It reminded me of the assertion by the French historian Phillipe Aries that there was no childhood in the Middle Ages, based on his examination of paintings from the period in which children were dressed as adults; he claimed that *childhood* as a distinct period of life was invented in the Renaissance. This was published in 1960 and endlessly quoted during the past 30 years. There is now a cottage industry of scholarly medievalists demonstrating how wrong he was in one part of Europe after another. Due to their efforts we shall know more about the conditions of children in medieval Europe than anyone had imagined possible. I guess we should be grateful to Aries for his statement.

I hope I shall learn from your paper what you think the role of linguistic analysis is in understanding culture and social action. It seemed from your talk as if you give language a paramount, I thought you said "privileged", position in the representation of meanings and experience. I think it is possible to exaggerate the role of language and correspondingly underestimate the importance of other vehicles of communication -- as Turner tried to show in his analysis of visual symbols and ritual action. That was one reason why he called his approach semiological or symbology, as embracing something more than lexical semantics. Also, I think many Africanists have had the experience that language as a medium of communication is a good deal less privileged in African communities than we are used to here; that the "unsaid" is terribly important and that Africans would not look to speech for the real meanings of social behavior. From this perspective, linguistic analysis must take its place in a larger picture of communicative action. The goal is sociological, or I would argue psychosocial, understanding of how communities work, but perhaps that isn't your goal.

You could argue that since neither Turner nor (virtually) any other social anthropologist of Africa has tried to unpack or decode local culture from the intensive and rigorous linguistic analysis of the kind you're proposing, how can they know it won't work? That's a fair enough argument, and it makes me eager to see what you have done and are doing. I hope we can continue the discussion.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Levine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small arrow-like flourish at the end of the last name.