
Reviewed by Peter Crossman (Department of Anthropology, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium)

Published on H-SAfrica (March, 2001)

The politics of interpreting healing

The title of this collective work on the anthropology of Africa is remarkably clear in identifying for the reader the intended aims and significance of the eight original and interpretative, from both the field research and theoretical standpoints, articles it contains. Although the apparent focus is on healing rituals this book is of interest far beyond the bounds of medical anthropology. Those familiar with this field and African studies in general will immediately recognize the reference to the work of John Janzen in developing a regional healing cult construct for Bantu-speaking Africa, primarily in his watershed 1992 publication entitled *Ngoma. Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa.* It equally refers to Janzen’s career in developing a unique approach to the interpretation of healing in Africa by borrowing on the title of his earliest monograph, *The Quest for Therapy in Lower Zaire* (1978). Given the editors’ intention to critically engage with Janzen’s hypothesis on ngoma, it is only fair that they have allowed Janzen himself the opportunity to respond to the other contributors in an ‘Afterword,’ in itself a valuable retractiones (an up-dated review, not a retraction) of his own work and views.

To the extent that the book is developed as a response to Janzen, its strength in part lies in its focus (at times repetitive) on a particular range of phenomena and questions, namely the political aspects of ngoma. A preliminary chapter by the editors sets out the scope of the work and offers its own definition of ngoma, worthwhile summing up here as institutions delimited by three ‘perimeters’ (Appadurai) or ‘themes’: articulation of transition; production of power or authority in association with the spirit world; and expression in rhythm. Their introduction offers a brief but insightful history of the interpretation of possession, divination and the healing complex as a background to the engagement with Janzen’s hypothesis. Here they indicate their choice of a wider delimitation of ngoma comprising, beyond ‘the field of healing,’ “life-cycle rituals, seasonal rituals and royal rituals, to name only the most conspicuous ones.” In their assumption that all these rituals equally share a concern for both “the person in transition and the society in transition” they argue that “as a discourse ngoma may pertain to all spheres of life—the personal, the social, the political, the economic or the ecological” (p. 6).

What may not immediately be apparent to the reader is that all of the contributors (save Janzen of course) hail either directly or indirectly from what might be called the Matthew Schoffeleers’ school of anthropology in the Netherlands, all of them having read under either him or his students. This factor certainly contributes to the orientation of the book and the unity of approach among the authors as well, although it undoubtedly limits the potential for alternative applications or assessments of Janzen’s work. The originality of this book lies in its exposure of power relations addressed by, or exercised within, therapeutic rituals. It well demonstrates the mul-
tiple aspects and layers of significance in healing rites: material, individual, social and political, for it is in fact the simultaneous or overlapping nature of ngoma discourse and action that embodies its genius and power rather than its efficacy on any single plane, whether psychological or political. One wonders, however, if in forcing the issue of the political nature of ngoma some of the originality of Janzen’s analysis is overlooked if not obscured.

Turning to the contents, it is of course very fortunate that gender perspectives have been taken on board among the contributions of the four women authors placed first in the lineup (noblesse oblige?), yet perhaps even more auspicious that not all have confined themselves to gender approaches. Henny Blokland’s essay “Kings, Spirits and Brides in Unyamwezi, Tanzania,” focuses on competitive and secular drumming (articulated in reference to unitary and sacred drumming), particularly in the context of weddings, to illustrate ngoma as more than a healing strategy but as a means of dealing with competition and aggression within a society. She helpfully distinguishes three elements as part of any ngoma complex: drum or instrument, performance, and performers. Annette Drews provides an analysis of the expression of gender opposition and social contradiction in the context of eastern Zambian (Kunda) women’s initiatory rites. Of particular interest is her treatment of the increasing influence of patriarchal elements on the rites in the wake of Christianization, and the evolution of women’s responses to these pressures. Ria Reis takes as her point of departure the theme of Eliade’s ‘wounded healer’ for her analysis of the initiation and work of Swaziland diviners (tangoma). Rather than focusing on the healer as initiate, she highlights the discourse in the interaction between healer and patient, a perspective that allows her to point out the highly creative work of the diviners in circumscribing and addressing new social ills, thereby bridging the gap between therapeutic and political ngoma. In a study of the Mhondoro territorial cult in Zimbabwe, Marja Spierenburg goes even further in this direction in her emphasis on the role of the healer’s clientele. In doing so, she is able to demonstrate the extent to which lay clientele raise and negotiate communitarian issues, in part through the way they evaluate and sanction the very status of the medium or healer her- or himself. Basing his remarks on a case study of the Mbona cult among the Tengani of Malawi, Matthew Schofeleers argues that regional earth and rain cults inherently involve the well-being and production of the society as a whole, and thereby embody capacities to criticize and sanction traditional rulers. Inspired by René Girard’s interpretation of the scapegoat king, he ingeniously proposes that a chief’s political failure is a necessary disposition for his role as giver of rain and fertility. Instances of apparent social rebellion, as expressed by the cults, are in reality institutional means of renewing and consolidating the society.

Two further articles in the collection distinguish themselves in seeking to highlight political aspects of ngoma-type rites within the Christianized context of contemporary Zion and fundamentalist churches. Contesting the view that such churches are apolitical, Cor Jonkers focuses on the Mdzimu branch of Zionist churches in urban Zambia in his discussion of the mutual impact of politics and healing rites within the churches. A perceptive aspect of his work lies in his analysis of the contrasting roles of leaders, members and patients within these groups and their respective relations to political processes. While Jonkers stresses the continuity of the political nature inherent to therapeutic ngoma institutions and these churches, Rijk van Dijk points rather to a major shift in spatio-temporal conceptualization where the fundamentalist, so-called Born-Again, movements in Malawi are concerned. They represent, he argues, a fundamental contestation of local traditional healers and authorities and their vision of social order and reproduction. This “rupture with the past, and rapture with the future” is by no means apolitical as the ideological content of the new discourse reflects contemporary social conflict and embodies a prescriptive view of the ideal society.

In a concluding chapter, Janzen himself warmly welcomes the extension of the ngoma concept to ‘healing’ or ‘spirit’ churches, as he does the expansion tout court of the notion as proposed by the authors and many other of their insights. He subsequently offers a more nuanced review of his own theoretical development in the light of the foregoing articles. In the event, Janzen sums up his revised position on the relation between therapeutic and political dimensions of ngoma as follows: “I remain uncomfortable with the suggestion that there are separable ‘therapeutic’ and ‘political’ ngomas. This reduces the analysis into a typological approach based on our differentiation of politics from healing. I think we must rather acknowledge the power-dimension of all ngoma-type institutions, at whatever phase of a cycle they may be in, whether or not they have to do with healing” (p.161). Finally, he points to future directions of research on ngoma, citing both the penetration of ngoma by western biomedicine and its penetration of global media and markets.
In critical perspective, and setting aside for the moment the escape route proposed by Janzen mentioned just above, the work confronts the reader with the choice of whether or not to accept the hypothesis of the pervasively political nature of ngoma. Two problems in particular point away from that postulate, however: one of definition, namely that of the term ‘political,’ and one of range, namely that of similarities or distinctions in the nature of the various cults embraced by the ngoma spectrum. And one wonders whether the authors have not kicked in an open door inasmuch as Janzen himself described “ngoma as an institution, in the tradition of Durkheim, Weber and Marx” (1992:173) and even invited research on the evident political dimension of ngoma. We have the first inklings of trouble when, in the introduction, it is explained that one wishes to broaden the understanding of ngoma by including the political aspects, and at the same time move beyond the therapeutic dimension in order to understand all types of ngoma, a reasoning that would appear to be somewhat circular.

First, on the definition problem, one is reminded of the title of a book, with which some of the authors are undoubtedly familiar, stating: “everything is political but politics is not everything.” In the dictionaries, the abstract of our Western imaginary, the notion of politics is inevitably (historically) linked to the exercise of government which itself is bound to the notion of the city or nation-state. The question, then, is really this: does the category ‘political’ apply to the essence and various ramifications of the ngoma cult (and not whether it is a ‘Western’ notion alone or whether it applies to societies in which ngoma is found)? Undoubtedly some of the articles demonstrate this to be so, for example where there is a ritualized participation of the king or chief in ngoma-related cults, or where the cult group manifestly addresses issues pertaining to institutions and instruments of social order. Or: that gender issues have political import is undisputed, but the revealing question is what, if anything at all, gender dimensions in ngoma rites may tell us about politics. Despite the book’s claims, traces of doubt emerge where some articles refer to ‘micro-’ or ‘marginally’ political processes, or even equivocate the terms social and political, as if in apology for the absence of unmistakably political factors. Politics, after all, is only a subset of social life.

Second, with regard to the range of phenomena comprised by the term ngoma, Janzen’s own uncertainty in extending the term to such a wide array of rites and institutions is reflected, more than anywhere else, albeit indirectly, in his discussion as to whether or not ngoma is the most appropriate umbrella term, and it is this ambiguity that has opened the door for debate. More than anyone, he is certainly aware of the broad scope and variety of healing cults, and therefore their inherent differences. The pattern most relevant to the discussion here is the contrast between patriarchal cults, on the one hand (these are centered in the public space, village square, market or shrine, they focus on order, control and public identity, and are mediated by vision), and, on the other hand, matri-centered rites (which are sited in the margins, forest or the inner back of the dwelling, and are focussed on fertility and reproduction mediated by the womb). The former clearly have political aims - such as to enhance the acute governing gaze of the chief - while the more matri-centered a cult is the less political it is (unless perhaps one wishes to make gender synonymous with politics); the latter type may even serve to escape political control - a political act if you wish. Inter-regional and certainly inter-tribal cults are not likely to be essentially political in nature. It is only by ignoring or minimizing these kinds of differences that one can imply the sort of generalization that all ngoma or healing cults are political. To do so is to mitigate the originality of Janzen’s pioneering exploration of interregional similarities of various types of cults as well as underrate the perspectives opened up by his emphases on therapeutic discourse and ‘doing’ ngoma, based on his intimate familiarity with cults in western Congo.

In conclusion, one could have wished for the inclusion of at least one study of ngoma in South Africa itself, whether or not as a prolongation of Janzen’s own research in Cape Town, for three reasons: the very profusion of ngoma-related practices in that country, the high degree of cross-fertilization already noted by Janzen (1992:175) (1), and the unquestionably greater exposure to transcultural processes of urbanization and globalization, the last being the very note on which Janzen closes this collection. Finally, the book’s title also betrays its contents on one other important count, its otherwise promising proposition of the concept of fruition as a substitute for the expressions ‘healing’ or ‘therapy.’ One might well have expected a more thorough and focussed treatment of such a pregnant metaphor, otherwise mentioned only in passing in the texts. Ironically, Janzen himself provides the sole discussion of any consequence of the term fruition. Its symbolization, without excluding politics, decidedly points to facets of life transcending that domain. Inasmuch as causality and energy, force and power, have been compartmentalized into the realms of the material (physics,
or biology, and industry) and of the social constructs (the state and politics), respectively, we have been blinded to other manifestations of life and their capacities for fruition, in both the reproductive and existential senses.

These points notwithstanding, *Quest for Fruition* is undoubtedly a groundbreaking contribution to the debate. It presents a coherent, informative and highly readable (outside a few editorial foibles) collection of articles whose depth and consistency in dealing with the phenomenon of healing cults in southern Africa offsets the constraint of not being able to put forward a broader range of perspectives.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5046

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.