Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual

Victor Turner

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IN NDEMBU RITUAL

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REVELATION AND DIVINATION IN NDEMBU RITUAL

VICTOR TURNER

Cornell University Press

ITHACA AND LONDON
TO MUCHONA,
friend and educator
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Foreword

Recently both the research and theoretical concerns of many anthropologists have once again been directed toward the role of symbols—religious, mythic, aesthetic, political, and even economic—in social and cultural processes. Whether this revival is a belated response to developments in other disciplines (psychology, ethology, philosophy, linguistics, to name only a few), or whether it reflects a return to a central concern after a period of neglect, is difficult to say. In recent field studies, anthropologists have been collecting myths and rituals in the context of social action, and improvements in anthropological field technique have produced data that are richer and more refined than heretofore; these new data have probably challenged theoreticians to provide more adequate explanatory frames. Whatever may have been the causes, there is no denying a renewed curiosity about the nature of the connections between culture, cognition, and perception, as these connections are revealed in symbolic forms.

Although excellent individual monographs and articles in symbolic anthropology or comparative symbology have recently appeared, a common focus or forum that can be provided by a topically organized series of books has not been available. The present series is intended to fill this lacuna. It is designed to include not only field monographs and theoret-
ical and comparative studies by anthropologists, but also work by scholars in other disciplines, both scientific and humanistic. The appearance of studies in such a forum encourages emulation, and emulation can produce fruitful new theories. It is therefore our hope that the series will serve as a house of many mansions, providing hospitality for the practitioners of any discipline that has a serious and creative concern with comparative symbology. Too often, disciplines are sealed off, in sterile pedantry, from significant intellectual influences. Nevertheless, our primary aim is to bring to public attention works on ritual and myth written by anthropologists, and our readers will find a variety of strictly anthropological approaches ranging from formal analyses of systems of symbols to empathetic accounts of divinatory and initiatory rituals.


I am retaining the vernacular in the texts, not only for the sake of those familiar with Bantu languages, but also for American, English, French, and Italian symbolic anthropologists who are currently engaged in an extensive and lively debate on the explanation, interpretation, and translation of symbolic forms among different cultures. Readers not interested in these controversies can skip the vernacular texts; but responsibility to professional colleagues demands their reten-
tion. The texts are my considered selection from field material and best demonstrate my theoretical position concerning ethnographic description and interpretation.

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