

SYMBOLIC COLOUR: VICTOR TURNER REASSESSED.

This paper examines the importance of colour as a means by which the Ndembu express their ideas of their society and their perception of the world around them in symbolic language. Victor Turner's analysis of Ndembu colour symbols has been recognised as a basis for the study of colour symbols in general, and in fact for the study of different symbols both between and within cultures (Tambiah 1968, Hallpike 1969). This paper will attempt to reassess Turner on the basis of his own ethnographic material and to construct a different approach to the study of the colour symbolism of the Ndombu.

Turner (1966) starts by referring to the present revival of interest in dualism; the left and the right hand, and other symbolic dyads. He then introduces the three colours which by a complicated argument he interprets as representing or symbolising three 'basic' bodily biological products. These are, semen/milk (white), blood (red) and exoreta (black). We have here a triadic system: three being the basic family unit (man, woman and child) the three basic bodily products and the three colours. It is not this triadic scheme that I wish directly to consider, but rather Turner's interpretation of colour.

Three colours are used by the Ndembu in the context of ritual: white, red and black. "At the apex of the total symbolic system of the Ndembu is the colour triad, white-red-black. At certain esoteric episodes in the boys circumcision ritual and in the initial ritual of the men's and women's funerary associations of Mung'ong'i and Chiwilli the meanings of these three colours are taught to young Ndembu". (Turner 1965:90). We must start here with the Ndembu interpretation, and see what underlying motives prompt them to use these colours; why they are interpreted the way they are by the Ndembu and whether from this basis we can postulate any univocal definition of colour symbols.

Turner lays out the meanings of the colours as the Ndembu are taught them. White has twenty three interpretations, red seven and black eight. (Turner 1966:58-61). I shall not repeat all these in detail but give a synopsis.

In an earlier paper Turner wrote of the colour white: "The concept of whiteness (is) a complex one, for it includes qualities (goodness, strength), virtue (generosity, remembrance of one's ancestors), the rewards of virtue (freedom from fears and mockery, fertility, living to a ripe old age), relationships (between ancestors and living political superiors and inferiors) and states (life, old age)" (1962a:142). Notice that white is not linked to solid objects, but is a concept; white and whiteness are ideals. Black is similar and stands for blackness; it has conceptual associations with badness, unluckiness, witchcraft, disease etc. Red, however, is very different. It is not abstract; red things are not ideals, "red things are of blood or of red clay" (1966:59).

Red has different meanings, unlike black and white which are each directed towards one idea. White and black are emphatic in their respective meanings and are also the antithesis of each other, "Red things belong to two categories, they act both for good and ill, these are combined" (1966:60). Red also "seems to share the qualities of both white and black" (1966:64). Red is thus a link between white (goodness/order) on the one hand, and black (badness/disorder) on the other. Unlike white and black, which each have single conceptual meanings and constitute single colours, red, which has various

gradations of meanings between the concepts of black and white, is a variety of shades of red. It encompasses a spectrum of red tinges ranging from white on the one side to black on the other. I have attempted to represent this variation diagrammatically (diagram 1).

"Red things have power" (1966:60) and power itself is a very ambivalent property. Power can be directed negatively (towards blackness) or positively (towards whiteness).

I think Turner begins to realise that red is not just one colour, but a spectrum of shades when he says "the blood of menstruation and murder is therefore 'bad' blood and is connected by the Ndembu with blackness" (1966:68) and "sorcerers and witches.....are people with black livers" (1966:69). Blood and livers are red, but menstrual blood, dried blood and the colour of livers are nearest black in colour. In an earlier paper Turner made this even clearer when he said the Ndembu "say that the blood of healthy people is 'clean and white', and the blood that is attacked by disease is 'bad' or 'black' (1962a:147-148). Elsewhere Turner wrote "some diseases, in addition to being 'black' also have a 'red' lethal character" (1967:304). Red is near goodness and order (white) because semen, which is considered a form of blood is classed in the category red although it is white (I shall return to this point later). White and black are emphatic symbols for the Ndembu, they are positive and negative and can be arranged "in a series of antithetical pairs, as for example: goodness/badness; purity/lacking purity; lacking bad luck/lacking luck" etc. (1966:64). Yet the colours themselves as well as in their meanings have this emphatic relationship and antithesis. White and black as colours are complete opposites; they cannot really, as colours, be variable, as red can. There are many shades of red ranging from brightness (near white) to darkness (near black). White is white, mixed with any other colour it takes the shade of that colour; black is black and darkens another colour. So, by their very nature white and black have only very little variation in colour and thus only single meanings, while red in colour and meaning can, if required span various gradations.

This then is how the Ndembu see the colours in the context of initiation; white and black as emphatic, red as being like both of them. But what do these colours really mean, and why are they used as symbols during ritual? If they are symbols they must be expressing something, but what and why?

Turner probably starts to look for the answer to these questions in biological symbols firstly because the Ndembu say red things are of blood, and secondly because of the significance of the milk tree as a symbol linked to the colour white. Red is important because of the link it has with blood; blood is important in hunting ceremonies and feared in the form of menstrual blood and blood spilt in homicide. White in some ceremonies is linked with the milk tree of which Turner says "The milk tree is the place of all mothers of the lineage. It represents the ancestress of women and men" (1964:22). The milk tree is associated with lactation. So Turner looks for bodily functions in the underlying symbolism of the colours. Red is blood and because of the different forms of blood it has different meanings; white for Turner is represented by milk and semen and the black is associated with excreta. How black becomes excreta is not made clear in Turner's text but black had to be linked to some function. For Turner then, all the colours represent "products of the human body" (1966:80).

But are we limited to semen, milk, blood and excretase bodily products? What of sweat and tears, are they not basic bodily products also? Urine also has been left out of the argument, though we shall see it has specific connections. It is not immediately apparent that all excreta are black, or that blood, apart from menstrual blood which

is restricted to certain age groups of women, is part of the natural bodily function of waste disposal. Is not blood part of the body, part of the living substance of life and its spilling accidental, not a biological necessity? Writing of a medicine called Chikwata which is said to have large thorns Turner says "A man's body stays well if he is caught by them. They catch him strongly so that his blood inside him stays strong"(1967:191 my emphasis). The colour red for the Ndembu represents all kinds of blood and things associated with blood including semen. "Semen is white....good blood"(1966:60) and 'blood whitened (or purified) by water'(1966:53), so blood can be classed by degrees of purity of which semen is the most pure kind. Semen is not classed by the Ndembu directly with white but with red, though semen is said to be near whiteness in concept but still within the category red. Urine is the liquid which purifies semen and adds to it "according to the Ndembu belief, semen is 'blood mixed with water'"(1967:201). Turner needs to tell us far more about how the bodily functions are supposed to work for the Ndembu especially in the relation between lactation, whiteness, women and the concept of matrilineality and semen, urine and blood (in hunting, witchcraft etc.) and the position of men and their part in reproduction. It is worth noting, however, that of the two bodily functions explicitly mentioned by the Ndombu in relation to the colour triad, blood and semen (with urine) are both classed with the colour red. White and black have no such relationship explicitly with any bodily objects but only with abstract ideas or refined substances.

What is important is that red is linked with down to earth objects—the substance of life, blood and semen. Blood is something with which the Ndembu are in contact everyday in hunting, menstrual avoidances and of course as a substance of themselves of health and of strength. Semen is the produce of new life, the begetter of children, the strength of the society and its ultimate health and survival. But blood has both good and bad associations. Red is for the Ndembu the colour of the living. It is what they are themselves—good and bad. What is more it is how they are in their world and how the world is to them. "Red things have power; blood is power for a man....must have blood or it will die"(1966:60).

Semen is the good side of man, pure blood. Semen is such pure blood that it has nearly achieved whiteness: "red semen is ineffective or impotent, it cannot penetrate fully."(1966:60). The Makonde have a similar belief: "A woman conceives through the semen of a man. If the man has black semen there will be no bearing of a child. But if he has white semen he will have a child"(Harries 1944 quoted by Turner 1966:55). Whiteness is what the Ndembu strive for, it is the ultimate ideal, but they themselves are in reality red, of blood and created by semen. The Ndembu, by linking white and red are emphasising the facts of life that they are red and what is ideally to be achieved is white. Writing of one tribe in Madagascar Leib stated that when a child has its first hair out the natives also "make a red cap with white bands for the child. 'Red' is the symbol of the power of life, 'white' the hope which shall guide him on his way"(1946:33) ³. We might also postulate that if white is linked to lactation in certain circumstances lactation supports the child, guides him to adulthood and helps in the continuance of the system. Black is the evil side of man and because it exists this too must be expressed as the ultimate in the opposite direction to white, if only as an example. The reason why white and red are expressed more forcibly is because even if blackness does exist there is no reason why it should be given the same emphasis—indeed there are many more definitions of whiteness than blackness; black is "the neglected member of the triad"(1966:70).

I think the Ndembu everyday in their lives recognise the difference between good and evil, that men themselves in varying

degrees contain the will or power to be both yet somehow neither can be totally controlled to bring about either complete whiteness or blackness⁴. Chihamba, a very important cult to the Ndembu, is itself a paradox. Men kill the white spirit which is all the goodness of their world. Thus the initiates, who re-enact the killing, are faced absolutely with the basic contradictions of their world and life (Turner 1962b).

I have still not explained why the colours are significant in initiation. I agree with Turner (1968) when he considers rituals, especially initiation, as the concentration of ideas (and therefore the concentration of symbols). What the symbols represent, however, must be lasting, not just significant during the ceremony; what they show must be of use outside the ritual context, even if the association with the symbol is less important. Turner says of the colours in relation to initiation: "thus red may be a persistent motive in hunting rites among the Ndembu, and white in rites dealing with lactation or village ancestral shades. But at the initiation of juniors into the rights and duties and values of seniors all three colours receive equal emphasis" (1966:80 my emphasis). Have the three colours the same meaning when applied to the individual rites? Surely what we are dealing with here is the relationship between three colours, three symbols in one incident, that of initiation. In the girls' puberty rites there might be a link between white and lactation; the muddy tree stands for the milk and milk in this circumstance for whiteness. In initiation, however, it is the three which are used in a relationship with each other to show something. White need not mean or signify the same object in initiation as it did in another ceremony for here the three colours white, red and black are used together.

Turner would have been well advised to consult Reichards' findings in studying colour symbolism among the Navaho. She reports: "Colour, an outstanding symbol in Navaho ceremonialism, is especially significant in combination.....No colour or sequence runs through a single chant consistently; none has the same meaning in every setting, nor does chance account for apparent exceptions to the rules; every detail is calculated. If there seems to be a variation it is for (a) cause" (1950:187). Reichard goes on to give a warning to those studying colour symbolism: "The problems posed should be born in mind by all who collect material....(on colour symbolism).. ..colours have meaning according to their position in a complex, the order being as significant as the colour itself. The colours are few, the permutations many" (1950:214-215)⁵.

It is important that the Ndembu novices are taught the meanings of the colours, that the ideas are expressed in relation to social experiences. The linking of red to blood and semen brings the symbolic meaning down to concrete terms. The Ndembu are taught to associate the colours in cultural and social terms, not explicitly in terms of biological experiences. The symbolic meaning of the colour triad lies at the social level of control, but at the same time because of psychological associations colour may have a double meaning. It is, however, impossible to separate clearly individual associations from cultural influences in the interpretation of colour. This is what Turner tries to do, he looks for conscious and unconscious meanings in the colours in relation to the psychological changes which are supposed to occur in initiation. But do the association of the colours with biological functions exist before or after initiation if they exist at all? Is initiation the means by which men control biological urges or biological functions by transforming them into social categories? Surely initiation is a directive and not so much a limiting experience, and in being directive it must not create complexes but control them. Initiation involves the drawing of a line between childhood and adulthood.

The controlling of biological signals by symbolic acts in toilet training must be completed early in a child's life.⁶ The type of control and teaching outlined to initiates seems far more to be involved with the rights of adulthood such as sexual teaching, rather than in relation to other experiences (Turner 1967). Many other things are also taught to the initiates.

Initiation is into a new world, the world of adults, the world as it really is beyond childhood. The novices must be shown and given a set of ideals, values and standards, not only to control their psycho-biological experiences but more important a method of social perception to control the inherent nature of their worlds and the other people within it. The control of cognition is thus achieved by a variety of symbols and the three colours together I believe help to show how those worlds are and to indicate the acceptable mode of action. I believe this is the point Turner should have stressed, not an underlying motive, if it exists at all.

I have spent a large part of this paper on re-analysing the meaning of the colours for the Ndembu mainly because I believe Turner to be wrong and that he has directed analysis onto the wrong lines. Later in the paper Turner tries to put his concepts on a wider footing by cross-cultural comparison. But even in the examples he chooses there are often more than three colours and the interpretation of the colours varies. Space does not here permit me to show how widely the interpretations of colours vary both within and between cultures. Turner's analysis shows clearly how dangerous the bonding of ethnography to fit pre-conceived ideas and a wide cross-cultural comparison on limited evidence can be, not only to the original data but also to those who attempt to follow his example. Too often anthropologists attempt to explain facts in their own sociological and psychological models, often creating complicated secondary symbols. This I feel is what Turner has done with colours; a forest of symbols can so easily become a jungle.

The totality of Turner's paper leads others to follow his example. Hallpike starts his paper on social hair by stating: "Meanings constantly recur. For example as Turner (1966) has pointed out black, white and red are colours most often used in ritual... .. Given then, that there is a number of symbols with a common signification in different cultures, I will try to explain the basis of this similarity". (1969:256). But is it 'given'? I would certainly contest this statement for even within Ndembu ritual the 'signification' varies. Similarities of meaning may occur between cultures, but only because some cultures have similar patterns and the number of associations that can occur are ultimately limited.⁸

It must be remembered that Turner emphasised an idea which was easily used by other ethnographers in considering their field-work: the importance of colours in ritual contexts. As Turner was and perhaps is the accepted expert on the analysis of symbols his definition was readily adopted.⁹ But instead of considering the nature of the colours themselves and their relation to the context of initiation as well as to 'values, rites and duties' of the initiates, he went on to look for underlying meanings. Meanings which prompted one reviewer who has an interest in psychological anthropology, to say they were based upon a "kind of psychological speculation that was popular in the nineteenth century" and to be so provoked as to write: "it is curious that social anthropology... .. finds it easy to return to the nineteenth century for its models of psychological and historical research" (Wallace 1968:393). The message is clear: if one does not fully understand the implications of putting forward home-brewed theories involving psychology one should not attempt to do so.

What I object to, however, is that like many such statements in

anthropology today, Turner has left us with a legacy in which all colours in ritual must be associated with bodily functions and substances in triadic patterns. No doubt Turner is a brilliant ethnographer, his vast volumes on the Ndembu are proof of this, but by so deeply fixing a general rule in the facts of the Ndembu any argument against this rule must also be against those facts. Only Turner, besides the people themselves (and one has doubts sometimes whether they ever know), knows the Ndembu; we only know them through his works.

Tambiah is a good example of how limiting Turner's analysis is. In analyzing Trobriand colour symbolism Tambiah found three colours, red, white and black, but was unable to use Turner's ideas about their conscious or unconscious meaning. "The reader may wish to relate the significance of Trobriand colour symbolism to the assertions and hypothesis made by Turner (1966)...unlike the Ndembu, red for the Trobrianders does not appear to be an ambivalent colour. They do not hunt nor do they fear menstrual blood". (1968:205). Tambiah fully realised the symbolic significance of colour but could not agree with Turner's analysis and instead of questioning his ideas further he merely left the reader to come to his own conclusions. I must admit I have heard many discussions about the symbolic meanings of colour and Turner's argument is usually scorned, but no one has as yet analysed his approach in writing. I think the answer to this lies in the point about the idea being so neatly interwoven with Ndembu material.

By adding other considerations overlooked by Turner some general points become apparent which must always be born in mind when considering colour symbolism. To be used and applied in ritual and other contexts, the colours have first to be refined into a substance. The Ndembu we are told use powdered clay for red and white and charcoal for the colour black and these are used in the ritual. Thus the colours are refined from a raw state and the use of colour may be restricted to the level of technology and the availability of appropriate substances. I do not know how many colours the Ndembu can refine from natural sources but Bühler states: "A large number of primitive peoples rely largely on mineral substances which limits them to white, black and yellow-brown red...natural environment, the presence of certain raw materials, and the level of technical knowledge are thus a frequent source of limitation to the use of colour" (1962:3).

We must also consider how colours are defined linguistically. When colours are defined linguistically by other cultures they need not follow a western pattern of division, thus "it becomes clear there is no such specific universal concept of colour". (Hollander 1966:92).¹⁰ Early writers tended to confuse the ability of people to define colours linguistically with the ability to define them physically.¹¹ This has now been proved to be nearly totally incorrect; however, certain shades of colours are sometimes indistinguishable in nearness of shade. Among the Hamaroc, colours are divided into four categories, black, white, red and green, within those categories all other colours are to be found. "All color terms can be reduced to one of these four, but none of the four is reducible" (Conklin 1955:342). Thus red for the Ndembu, which I think is a variety of shades of red, is still, linguistically called just red. The type of blood it represents indicated the variation in shade. In fact Turner says: "the colours white, red and black... are the only colours for which the Ndembu possess primary terms. Terms for other colours are either derivatives from those.... or consist of descriptive and metaphorical phrases" (1966:48)¹² (my emphasis).

Neither Turner nor myself have answered some of the deeper implications as to exactly why some objects and acts are specifically

chosen to be symbols and to convey meanings rather than by using other methods like language, myth or riddles. I believe the answer to this problem lies in the nature of colour itself and its importance in the perception of the world; symbolic colours are always found in combination with similar symbols or specific actions. In Ndemhu ritual this is especially apparent in the associations the colours have with other sensory symbols; heat and cold, wet and dry and the use of liquids in opposition to the dry powder forms of medicines. These I believe are potent symbols for they rely on the human senses combined with linguistic meanings and specific actions to convey messages. Elsewhere I have examined in a wider context the relation between such symbols, perception and the quest for meaning" (Urry n.d.).

At the end of his paper Turner wrote: "I am going to throw caution to the winds...for the sake of stimulating controversy" (1966: 80) and then placed before us cross cultural and universal rules for the interpretation of colour symbolism. I have not only disagreed with these rules but also with Turner's initial basis for the argument, his interpretation of colour for the Ndombu I hope, however, that my criticisms has been constructive and that Professor Turner will accept them in the spirit of his challenge; a challenge no one else has, as yet, found controversial enough to question.

James Urry .

Notes.

1. I would like to thank all those who assisted me in the construction of these ideas. I am especially grateful to Mr. Bruce Tappor and Dr. P.J. Uoko. Professor I.M. Lewis also commented on the paper and saved me from grammatical and logical errors. They are, of course in no way responsible for any of the opinions expressed which are purely my own.
2. It is strange how often red things are compared with power and danger in other cultures. This may be due to the vividness of the colour itself in the total natural landscape of colours surrounding man. It may also be due in part to its ambiguous association with substances which as Mary Douglas has pointed out often leads to a concept of power and danger (1966).
3. Boidelman (1964) has pointed out that white beads are given to a child among the Kaguru to express attractiveness and moral stability as well as social, moral and developmental features for the child's welfare.
4. The New England puritans had somewhat similar concepts. Not only did they dress in black and white, but they tended to see everything in terms of this emphatic difference. Men were not red, good and bad; they were either all good, white (and puritan) or all black and bad (other people). It has been shown how this attitude of seeing things in terms of black and white has influenced certain authors and poets whose upbringing was influenced by these Puritan principles.
5. Actually Turner in a number of papers admits that the meaning of symbols change within a ritual context, he calls this the 'positional' explanation of the symbol and also in different ceremonies the meaning can again change. By contrast his paper on colour symbolism argues universal interpretations; if the meanings vary for the Ndombu then surely they vary cross-culturally.
6. Turner does not, as far as I can find out, say anything about Ndombu child training in regard to these biological signals. I have checked the literature from similar people in the same area and find that most of this kind of training has been accomplished by at least thirty months.
7. As Durkheim said, social facts cannot be studied out of context or without outlining the context first: "facts which come from different societies cannot be profitably compared merely because they seem to resemble each other What errors have not been committed for having neglected this precept! It is thus that facts have been unduly

connected with each other which, in spite of exterior resemblances, really have neither the same sense nor the same importance" (1968:94). Certainly Turner has appeared to have neglected this precept. Symbols must always be considered in the circumstances in which they are used and if detached take on a false meaning. Thus we find Lévi-Strauss writing: "in China...white is the colour of mourning and red the colour of marriage" (1966:65). White is not the colour of mourning nor red the colour of marriage; white means something in mourning ceremonies as red has specific connotations in marriage. Just because a colour is used in a ceremony does not mean it represents that ceremony.

8. Hallpike is, however, considering a much narrower field of analysis and is more specific as to how and when hair is used and for what purposes.

9. Some authors tend to ignore Turner completely (Beck 1969); some find his statements do not fit their specific data (Lamphere 1969), while Boidelman (1968) suggests that Willis would have been better to have followed Turner's kind of analysis when dealing with colour symbolism in another paper. Whether Boidelman meant he was to follow Turner's example in emphasis or by example is not exactly clear.

10. For an early paper on colour vision see Rivers (1901) and for a paper outlining the various linguistic differences in relation to field work see Hollandor (1966). Whiteley (1966) also points out some ideas relating to linguistic categories of colour and concepts of meaning.

11. This point has, I believe, been recently challenged by Brent and Kay (1969).

12. A point must be made here about the colour yellow which is not defined linguistically but is often ritually equivalent to red (Turner 1966:48). The association with red appears only to be on the ground of impurity. When the maternal milk is either yellowish or reddish it is said to be impure (Turner 1969:59). The discoloured milk becomes linked with ideas of witchcraft, and witchcraft is conceived, as we have seen, within the colour red.

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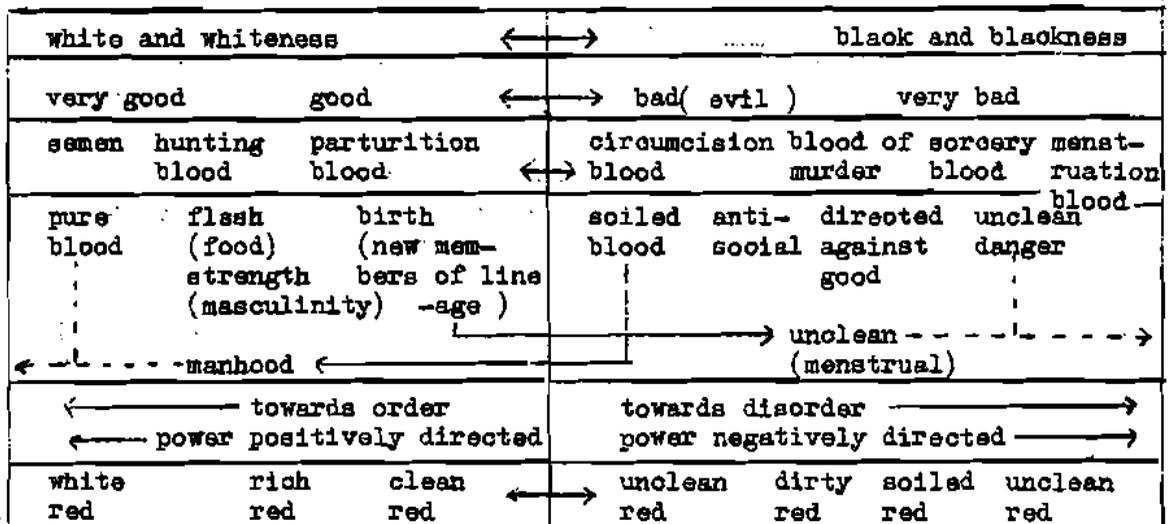


Diagram 1. Analysis of red to the Ndembu.