

THE INTERPRETATION OF NDEMBU RITUAL ACTION

In this article, I hope to cast doubts upon the prevalent assessment of Turner's work by anthropologists which, whilst criticising his orientation in his interpretations of Ndembu ritual action, judges his method to be correct. I therefore attempt a critical review of Turner's method in which my concern is to demonstrate how certain of his basic theories on the nature of ritual symbols derive from the usage of a construct which is inappropriate to a study of the 'meaning' of ritual symbols. In the second section, I examine the development of Turner's 'bi-polarity of reference' theory, the origins of which are different from those of the theories examined in the first section. In the final section of this article, I attempt a re-interpretation of the purely observational components of the 'bi-polarity of reference' theory, on the basis of which I suggest a new type of interpretation of Ndembu ritual action.

TURNER'S METHOD

The construct which Turner presents as the 'meaning' of the ritual symbol is a type of 'gestalt'. Such a construct can possess only two properties: content and boundary. On the subject of content, Turner's ideas are more consistent than on the subject of boundary. Hence, as the content of the 'gestalt' he consistently envisages symbolic objects, symbolic actions and cultural beliefs. Such an analysis therefore proceeds by noting and collating the following classes of data:

- (i) the symbolic objects and actions which occur in proximity to one another within a ritual performance;
- (ii) cultural beliefs associated with the above symbolic objects and actions, achieved by means of the collection of indigenous exegesis of their usage;
- (iii) a further set of symbolic objects and actions, occurring within the same and different types of ritual, which indigenous informants relate, by means of exegetical statements, to the first set of symbolic objects and actions;
- (iv) a further set of cultural beliefs associated with this second set of symbolic objects and actions; etc.

Immediately it becomes apparent that, unless we wish to establish the boundary of the 'gestalt' by means of a criterion unrelated to its content, only two boundaries deriving from the nature of the content present themselves

- 1) The inclusion of classes (i) and (ii) and exclusion of classes (iii) and (iv) within the 'gestalt', so that the 'gestalt' contains only juxtaposed symbolic objects and actions and the beliefs associated with them; or
- 2) The duplication of the procedures adopted above an infinite number of times. In this alternative, we can either conceive of the boundary of the 'gestalt' as enclosing the totality of Ndembu symbolic objects and actions and the beliefs associated with each object and action or, regarding such a boundary as co-terminous with a construct of 'culture', conceive of the boundary of the 'gestalt' as the boundary of the culture.

For the sake of brevity, I shall term these two constructs (1) 'the finite content-bounded 'gestalt'' and (2) the 'infinite content-bounded 'gestalt''.

In the case of the finite content-bounded 'gestalt', such a construct has its uses if we then argue that an objective of ritual action is the creation, or maintenance, of such a 'gestalt'. For, since sets of symbolic actions and objects vary between different types of ritual, we can then argue that different rituals maintain different 'gestalten', which endure, in the minds of the ritual actors, for a short period of time after the termination of the ritual. We can now apply this idea to Turner's most extensively documented example of a 'gestalt': the mudyi symbolism within the Nkang'a ritual, first analysed by Turner in 'Symbols in Ndembu Ritual' (Turner: 1967: 20-5).

Turner notes that the mudyi symbol exhibits bi-polarity of reference, the two referents being: breast-feeding and relationships between matrikin (fellow-villagers). The mudyi symbol therefore asserts an identity between two discrete areas of experience: the situation of breast-feeding and relationships between fellow-villagers. The Nkang'a ritual is not performed in response to a crisis situation, hence the objective of maintaining such a 'gestalt' must be to deal with a situation which is endemic to relationships between fellow-villagers. I suggest that, if Nkang'a is performed in a village split by factionalism, a characteristic of 'long-established' Ndembu villages, such a 'gestalt' stresses the mutual interdependence of fellow-villagers in opposition to the independence of two or more groups of more closely related matrikin within the village from one another, which is the manifestation of factionalism.

Mutual interdependence is a property which is perceptually manifest within the 'breast-feeding' area of experience, but which constitutes a conceptual property, variable through time, of the 'relationships between fellow-villagers' area of experience. Hence, accepting the type of interpretation which I have presented, the ritual symbol is here seen to 'structure' one area of experience by means of a property perceptually manifest within another area of experience.

The utility of the finite content-bounded 'gestalt' thus consists in the differentiation which is achieved through its usage between different types of ritual, the 'cognitive structures' of which closely resemble one another. 'Cognitive structures' refers to an aspect of the Ndembu ritual system entirely neglected by Turner. Briefly, if we correlate compatibilities and incompatibilities demonstrated by ritual action between juxtaposed ritual objects, we discern that these objects are arranged into a system of symbol classes, co-members of which are substituted for one another within rituals. The fourfold system of classes discerned expresses the fourfold system of social and supernatural categories based upon the two oppositions of 'male'/'female' and 'fertile'/'infertile'. The 'cognitive structure' of all Ndembu rituals is then seen to be the spatial separation of symbolic representations of the 'fertile' and 'infertile' conceptual categories, most clearly discerned in the 'casting out' of the patient, or 'ritual subject', designated 'infertile', from amongst the social group, designated 'fertile'.) For example, if we consider the 'gestalt' maintained by the mukula symbol within the Nkula ritual (Turner: 1968: 82-7), the cognitive structure of which closely corresponds to that of Nkang'a, we discern that it is not merely different from the mudyi 'gestalt', but non-comparable with it. We can argue that the mukula symbol 'structures' the area of experience of the woman who menstruates by means of properties perceptually manifest within the area of experience of the man who hunts. Thus, it can be argued that the mukula 'gestalt' maintains the dual division of 'fertile' sexual categories by maintaining that an item which cannot be classified within the one - the menstruating woman - must be classified within the other - the male (hunter) social category.

My criticism of the usage of the finite content-bounded 'gestalt' construct in the interpretation of ritual action is merely that it reflects the specific characteristics of the crisis situation existing prior to ritual performance and does not illuminate how Ndembu represent crisis situations in general as the existence of the 'infertile' in the midst of the 'fertile', a representation which can be discerned only by means of an examination of the morphology of symbol classes and the re-distribution of members of these classes between spatial categories within the ritual performance. However, this is a criticism of orientation and not of method, and therefore not strictly relevant in the present context.

Turner does not use a finite content-bounded 'gestalt' construct, rather his 'gestalt' construct exhibits a confusion between the infinite content-bounded 'gestalt' which, as I have argued, can only mean the totality of cultural beliefs associated with ritual action and, hence, 'culture' or 'society' itself, and the bounding of the 'gestalt' by means of a criterion - 'dominance' - unrelated to its content. The infinite content-bounded 'gestalt' construct implies that the appearance of a symbol in one type of ritual 'recalls', in the minds of the indigenous actors, its appearance in another type of ritual. The supposition is valid given certain qualifications. For example, the 'gestalten' created by ritual performances are subject to erosion through time, otherwise we cannot argue that an objective of ritual action is their maintenance. Given the nature of Ndembu cult organisation (the exclusion of women from men's cults and 'vice versa'; adeptness of adult Ndembu in one or two types of ritual only; travelling of adult Ndembu great distances in order to attend rituals performed by their own cult) it is obvious that no individual can be aware of all the contexts, throughout the ritual system, in which a single symbol appears; and that the previous types of ritual attended by each member of a social group within which a ritual is being performed will be different, hence the context in which the same symbol has last been apparent to each member of the group will be different, so that the context 'recalled' will vary with each individual ritual actor. Therefore, the appearance of a symbol in one type of ritual can neither be said to 'recall' all the contexts within which it appears throughout the ritual system, nor can it be said to 'recall' the same context in another type of ritual for every ritual actor.

If we argue that the appearance of a symbol in one type of ritual 'recalls' its appearance in another type of ritual, it is then possible to argue that the other symbolic objects with which the first is juxtaposed in the other type of ritual are therefore 'recalled' by the appearance of the first symbol in the contemporary ritual performance. If we then regard the 'meaning' of ritual symbols as existing on the level of the set of juxtaposed symbolic objects, it becomes possible to argue that the meaning which is 'recalled' is different from the meaning which is manifest in the contemporary ritual performance. However, we must bear in mind that the 'recalled' meanings vary with each ritual actor and that no individual ritual actor can 'recall' all such meanings which the single symbol can be said to possess throughout the ritual system. The only sense in which all such meanings can be said to be 'recalled' within a single ritual performance is a collective one: between them, the total ritual assembly could 'recall' all such meanings. But it would here be methodologically incorrect to argue that all such meanings constitute the reference of a single symbol, so that the single symbol 'recalls' the totality of indigenous 'culture' or 'society', because the 'gestalt' construct refers to a collection of items existing within the minds of indigenous actors, an attribute which such an 'extended' reference of the ritual symbol does not possess.

Therefore, the only sense in which the 'recall' notion implicit in the infinite content-bounded 'gestalt' construct is applicable reduces to a matter of individual variability. Since, in an analysis of the types of common alterations which are effected within individual Ndembu by means of ritual performance, such individual variability must be discounted, the usage of an infinite content-bounded 'gestalt' is seen to be methodologically incorrect, since the notion of 'recall' implicit in such a construct reduces to such individual variability. However, it is on this very notion of 'recall' that Turner bases his theory of ritual symbolism:

"..even though only a single designation of that symbol is situationally manifest, the 'penumbra' of latent senses to be manifest in other 'positional' combinations is nevertheless present." (Turner: 1969a: 13).

In Turner's terminology, 'positional combination' refers to the single context in which a symbol is juxtaposed with other symbols, and 'positional meaning' refers to the meaning of the object-set (set of juxtaposed symbols) in a single 'positional combination', which is regarded as co-terminous with the meaning of any single symbol within it. Since, within the totality of Ndembu rituals, virtually every type of symbolic object appears juxtaposed with almost every other type of symbolic object, Turner is forced to impose a restriction upon the number of positional combinations, or object-sets, which he will consider in his analysis of the ritual system, the totality of which, he argues, constitutes the 'total' meaning of any single symbol.

The criterion which he adopts is that of 'dominance'. When he first introduces the criterion (Turner: 1962: 70), it is manifestly based upon the extent of ritual action directed at a ritual symbol within a ritual performance or part of a ritual performance. However, subsequent definitions equate this criterion with that of 'relating to supernatural beings or forces':

"..dominant symbols are closely associated with nonempirical beings.. nonempirical powers or kinds of efficacy." (Turner: 1967: 31)

The criterion is therefore applied by means of noting association with supernatural beings through exegetical remarks or observation which suggests that 'protective influence..is believed to emanate over everyone involved' (Turner: 1962: 70) from the symbolic object or object-set.

As might be expected, the construct arrived at by means of the infinite content-bounded 'gestalt' and the 'dominance' criterion is a haphazard collection of objects, actions and beliefs which bears little relation, on the one hand, to representations existing within the minds of indigenous actors or, on the other hand, to a consistent set of properties of symbolic objects selected by the anthropologist. Yet, rather than scrutinize the method by means of which the construct is arrived at, Turner proceeds to regard these 'properties' of ritual symbols as empirical realities and to explain their role in efficacious ritual performance, rather than to regard them merely as the inevitable conclusions of a confused and inappropriate methodology.

The 'dominance' criterion does not alter the boundary of Turner's 'gestalt' construct, although it is used to locate the boundary. The boundary remains infinite. The reduction of the number of positional combinations to be taken into account which he achieves by means of the criterion merely allows plausible exposition of the 'gestalt' construct. He is therefore able to use the 'property' of the infinite content-bounded 'gestalt' - that the reference of a single symbol can be said to be the totality of cultural beliefs associated with ritual action - and argue that this construct is co-terminous with 'culture' and 'society':

"..ritual custom..is the concentration of custom, its refined extract as it were." (Turner: 1968: 23)

He then develops the idea that the 'meanings' of 'dominant' symbols comprise a haphazard collection of conflicting and mutually incompatible objects, actions and beliefs in two ways. Firstly, he argues that the role of such a 'phenomenon' is the achievement of paradox. Paradox achieves a form of 'dérèglement' in the minds of the ritual actors which temporarily breaks through the 'habitual patterns formed by secular custom, rational thinking and common sense' and induces religious experience (Turner: 1962: 85-6).

Secondly, Turner relates this incompatibility between the various 'meanings' (positional meanings) which he attributes to the same dominant symbol to incompatibility between the principles of residential affiliation (matriliney and virilocal residence) which he presents in 'Schism and Continuity in an African Society', and, thereby, to a conflict of loyalties for the individual Ndembu between the two sets of kin involved. He then regards this 'conflict' between structural principles as a major cause of the crisis situation which impels ritual performance. The 'dominant symbol' is then regarded as efficacious in reducing the incompatibility perceived by indigenous actors between the structural principles because it cloaks the multiplicity of conflicting rules with the apparent unity of their symbolic representation.

He then combines the two 'properties' of the dominant symbol, that it expresses the totality of 'tribal custom' or 'society' and that it achieves the unitary representation or expression of multiple conflicting rules, by arguing that, not only does the dominant symbol achieve the unitary representation of multiple conflicting structural principles, but that it 're-socializes' the ritual actors by impressing upon them the totality of Ndembu tribal custom or 'culture'. Hence, the 'conflict' is not merely disguised by means of the unitary representation of the conflicting rules, it is, as it were, 'submerged' beneath the totality of Ndembu culture, set against which it becomes insignificant:

"..the..dominant symbol..in its aggregate of meanings stands for unity and continuity of the widest Ndembu society, embracing its contradictions." (Turner: 1967: 46).

Hopefully I have demonstrated, in this section of the article, how Turner's most basic theories on the nature of ritual symbols are derived from a series of illogicalities generated by a method which is inadequate for the tasks which he undertakes.

THE 'BI-POLARITY OF REFERENCE' THEORY

My reason for discussing Turner's theory of the bi-polarity of reference of ritual symbols independently in this section is that, unlike the theories of symbolism discussed in the last section, it does not derive from the properties of the type of 'gestalt' construct used by Turner. Rather the bi-polarity of reference theory can be viewed as an observation which is interpreted and developed by means of a Freudian concept of personality.

Exegetical texts collected by Turner reveal that Ndembu associate ritual symbols with body fluids and emissions, such as blood, semen, faeces etc. From this observation, Turner concludes that, when the symbols associated with these body fluids and emissions appear in ritual, they 'recall', for the ritual actors, the non-ritual situations in which they commonly occur. Turner's development of this idea is carried out in terms

of his earliest theoretical orientation: an attempt to incorporate a Freudian view of personality into Gluckman's 'Rituals of Rebellion' thesis (Gluckman: 1954: 1963). Conscious of the shortcomings of Gluckman's location of the source of 'conflict' in ritual - between social groups or categories - Turner locates the source of such conflict within the individual psyche, between the 'socialised' and 'unsocialised' aspects of the personality and envisages a 'transference of affect' from the latter to the former within the ritual performance:

"I would like to postulate that the whole strength of the rebellious affect which is released in and through the ritual is transferred to the 'official' social order, not merely purged and allowed, as it were, to evaporate." (Turner: 1955: 53-4).

In 'Schism and Continuity', Turner applies the Freudian notion to his own Ndembu material:

"Ritual is the social mechanism by which a group is purged of the anarchic and disruptive impulses which threaten its crucial norms and values. These impulses are present in the majority of its members and come dangerously near to overt expression if there has been a long series of quarrels between its members." (Turner: 1957: 124).

He now takes the existence of body fluids and emissions amongst the referents of ritual symbols as evidence for this formulation:

"At one pole (of the ritual symbol's meaning) there is a cluster of referents to organic and physiological phenomena; at the other, a cluster of referents to the norms and values of society..it is the socially recognised organic pole of reference that appears to rouse feelings and impulses in the Ndembu ritual situation..the emotions, which, as psychoanalysts have shown, may often be connected with illicit and socially reprobated impulses..are purified by their association with morality and law. It is as though the 'energy' of virtue flowed from organic and primitive sources, though the original goals of the drives were altered.. In this way the obligatory is made desirable, and the desirable allowed a legitimate outlet. Again it would seem that the needs of the individual biopsychical organism and the needs of society, in many respects opposed, come to terms with one another in the master-symbols of Ndembu society.. what can be shown to be infantile murderous and cannibalistic impulses are transmuted into zeal on behalf of certain moral imperatives and legal rules." (Turner: 1968: 18-19).

The relationship which Turner posits between the 'organic' referents of the ritual symbol and drive reduction cannot be proven or disproven within the limits of anthropological competence. But what is clear about the theory is that it is developed in isolation from Turner's own ethnographic material, then imposed upon his own material at a later date. The most apt type of criticism of such a formulation is, therefore, an analysis of these 'organic' referents of ritual symbols which is independent of any pre-conceived theory, which results in an interpretation of their role in the ritual performance which can then be compared with the role which Turner assigns to them. In the next section of this article I attempt such an analysis.

THE PHYSIOLOGICAL/BEHAVIOURAL ANALOGY

Since the 'organic' referents of ritual symbols include foods, specifically breast milk (Turner: 1968: 18) and animal meat (Turner: 1967: 78), I shall include foods in the present analysis, so that the object of the present enquiry is to examine how Ndembu classify foods and body fluids and emissions. In ritual, two types of food - cassava and animal meat - are used as symbolic objects, and the opposition between

the two foods is related to the opposition between 'inhabited' and 'uninhabited' territory, since cassava is grown in 'inhabited' territory (the streamside and the periphery of the village) and animal meat is hunted in 'uninhabited' territory (the bush). The white/red opposition of the colours of the two foods is also, I suggest, used in ritual to express the opposition between inhabited and uninhabited territory.

Turner notes that Ndembu associate body fluids and emissions with specific colours or combinations of colours (Turner, 1967, 74-9). The only fluids and emissions associated with the colours red and white or the colour combination 'red+white' are: the semen of a fertile man and breast milk. Hence, we can conclude that Ndembu associate foods and fluids and emissions which occur in a reproductive context with the colours red and white. Conversely, we can argue that the colours red and white, used in a ritual context, denote reproductive and nutritive physiological functions.

Other body fluids and emissions are associated with the colour black, or combinations of black with red or white. I list these associations.

semen/urine of sorcerers	red+black
menstrual blood	red+black
leprosy pus	white+black
venereal disease discharge	white+black
faeces	black

Since the colour black denotes the anal function, the colour combinations 'red+black' and 'white+black' denote an intermingling, or 'confusion', of reproductive/nutritive and anal physiological functions. Furthermore, the fluids and emissions associated with the 'red+black' and 'white+black' colour combinations are themselves associated, by Ndembu, with infertility or sterility. The menstruating woman is regarded as temporarily infertile, therefore she is secluded in a hut on the outside of the village hut circle and prohibited from entering the village or cassava gardens, so that the fertile/infertile conceptual opposition is maintained spatially. Sorcerers are regarded as sterile, (Turner: 1953: 15). Leprosy is associated with the makishi dancers, who represent male sorcerers in ritual, and the secluded male ritual subject, also regarded as 'infertile', since the contracting of leprosy is believed to result from 'fertile' social categories approaching these two 'infertile' supernatural and social categories. Venereal disease inhibits procreation.

Hence, the 'infertile' conceptual category, symbolic representations of which are 'cast out' of the village by means of ritual action, is associated with the confusion of anal and reproductive/nutritive physiological functions and is negatively evaluated. On the other hand, the 'fertile' conceptual category is associated with reproductive and nutritive physiological functions and is positively evaluated. This leaves us with a conceptual category, associated with the anal function, which is neutrally evaluated and represented, in ritual, by means of 'black' symbols.

The only usage of 'black' in Ndembu rituals in isolation from other colours is in the Nkang'a ritual after the bride and groom have slept with one another for the first time. The following morning, pieces of black malowa (river mud) are placed in front of the entrances of every hut in the village (Turner, 1968, 260). Hence, indigenous thought is here structuring the area of experience of the relationship between bride and groom by means of the 'defecation' area of experience. I suggest that the property of the latter area of experience which is perceptually manifest is the privacy surrounding defecation. Bride and groom, until this first act of

intercourse, have had a relationship which has existed only in a public context, so that the use of the 'defecation' analogue at this point in their relationship stresses the new private behavioural context.

We can therefore compare the 'private' behavioural context which is, I suggest, denoted by the use of 'black' symbols with the 'public' context of distribution and consumption of food (Turner: 1957: 31-2). It can now be argued that the use of red and white symbols denotes a 'public' behavioural context, which is positively evaluated, and that the use of black symbols denotes a 'private' behavioural context, which is neutrally evaluated. The negatively evaluated conceptual category of the 'infertile' can therefore be interpreted as the confusion of the two behavioural contexts.

Significantly, the majority of the crisis situations within the Ndembu village recorded by Turner which were redressed by means of ritual performance had their origins in quarrels over the distribution of meat. Such quarrels originate from the situation of the hunter making preferential distributions of meat in private to his close kin whilst custom stresses the public nature of distribution of meat, so that private and public behavioural contexts are here confused; or they originate from the hunter consuming his 'kill' in the bush and claiming bad luck in hunting on his return to the village, whilst custom stresses the public nature of consumption of meat, another confusion of private and public behavioural contexts (Turner: 1957: 31-2).

An examination of symbolization in Ndembu rituals reveals that symbolic objects associated with the colour combinations 'red+black' or 'white+black' are 'cast out' of the social group during the ritual performance. We can therefore interpret these ritual actions as the symbolic removal of the confusions of private and public behavioural contexts which constitute the indigenous paradigm of the crisis situation. Furthermore, since the ritual subject is also 'cast out' of the group, designated 'infertile' and associated with 'white+black' or 'red+black' colour combinations, we can argue that the plurality of behavioural confusions committed by more than one member of the group, therefore 'diffused' throughout the group, are 'focused' or 'projected' on to the ritual subject. The unitary location of the behavioural confusions within the ritual subject and 'casting out' of the ritual subject from the group therefore convinces the ritual assembly that the group has been 'purged' of the behavioural confusions which constitute the indigenous representation of the crisis situation, so that the crisis situation is redressed.

In terms of this interpretation, the pathological condition of the ritual subject is also indigenously represented in terms of the confusion of behavioural contexts. Hence, the curing of the patient takes the form of the spatial and temporal separation of the two behavioural contexts within the ritual: the ritual subject is first secluded in a menstruation hut (placed in a 'private' context) then 'brought out' for a communion meal with his/her matrikin (placed in a 'public' context).

Having demonstrated how my own interpretation of the role of foods, body fluids and emissions in ritual can be developed into a satisfactory interpretation of Ndembu ritual action, I shall conclude this article by clarifying this interpretation. By means of associated colours, Ndembu relate a classification of the functions of the human organism to a classification of behaviour and make a common evaluation of the classes of physiological function and behaviour in the following way:

EVALUATION

HUMAN ORGANISM

BEHAVIOUR

Positive	Reproductive and nutritive functions	Appropriate to the PUBLIC context
Neutral	Anal function	Appropriate to the PRIVATE context
Negative	Confusion of Anal and Reproductive/Nutritive functions	Confusion of PUBLIC and PRIVATE contexts

The behavioural area of experience is therefore classified by means of a perceptual framework derived from the 'organic' area of experience. Thus, the distinction between reproductive/nutritive and anal functions is perceptually manifest, but the distinction between behaviour appropriate to the public and private contexts is a purely conceptual one. Hence, the behavioural distinction is maintained by associating the confusion of the two types of behaviour with the confusion of the physiological functions, so that the revulsion commonly associated with the latter is transferred on to the former. The reader can now compare this interpretation of the role of foods and body fluids and emissions in Ndembu ritual with that of Turner and assess for himself which interpretation better explains their usage.

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