

# **An Africanist's Legacy – A workshop in Celebration of the Work of David Parkin**

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On the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of July, a workshop in celebration of David Parkin's work was held at the Pauling Centre for Human Sciences in Oxford. The workshop was organised jointly by the African Studies Centre, the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology (ISCA), All Souls College and SOAS. Following his retirement from the Oxford Chair of Social Anthropology in 2008, some 45 of David Parkin's former students and colleagues gathered to pay tribute to his work.

Having joined the University of London as an undergraduate to study Anthropology and Bantu and Swahili Linguistics, David Parkin began working in East Africa in the early 1960s. His enduring love for the region brought him first to Uganda in 1962, where he spent two years as a Research Associate of the East African Institute of Social Research. His fieldwork in Kampala led to his SOAS PhD in 1965, the year of his appointment to a SOAS lecturership, and later to the 1969 monograph *Neighbours and Nationals in an African City Ward*. Not one to linger in London, he embarked on a study of Giriama society in 1966, for which he chose to contrast his earlier urban study with a rural location. Several periods of fieldwork there produced two monographs, *Palms, Wine and Witnesses: Public Spirit and Private Gain in an African Farming Community* in 1972, and *The Sacred Void: Spatial Images of Work and Ritual among the Giriama of Kenya* in 1991. In this post-colonial context of rapid urbanization, however, Parkin remained drawn to issues of social change in cities, and this led him to carry out new fieldwork with Luo migrants in Nairobi. Towards the end of the 1970s he chose to explore the region further and to work among coastal Muslim communities in Tanzania. This move later brought him to work on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, and to an ever deepening engagement with the trans-national Indian Ocean world from the 1990s onwards.

Whilst Parkin came to Anthropology via an interest in language and comparative semantics and mastered three East African languages within the early years of his career, his concerns gradually grew to encapsulate every aspect of social life, from class formation, politics, economics and legal systems to therapeutic practices, transnational religious networks, forms of Muslim prayer, ways of 'learning' religion, performance, displacement, the material culture of loss, and cognition. Parkin's exploration of these themes has always been grounded in thorough ethnographic knowledge of East Africa, and this rare combination of a broad geographic and linguistic range, an enduring engagement in a wider region and an intuitive sense of social change undoubtedly accounts for his immense contribution to British Anthropology. This was reflected in a workshop in which participants explored a wide range of themes, often but not exclusively with a focus on East Africa.

On the first day, David Mills opened the workshop with a paper (co-authored by Richard Vokes) on credit societies and the search for school fees in Uganda which paid tribute to Parkin's early work on burial societies. This was followed by a paper by Ana Margarida Santos on ethnicity and the ownership of history in northern Mozambique, a reminder of Parkin's pioneering interest in ethnicity in a context of urban migration. Nanda Pirie read a thoughtful paper on transformations in Alur knowledge (north-west Uganda) by the late Aidan Southall, who passed away in 2009 and was an intellectual mentor to Parkin over four decades. Katsuhiko Keida revisited Parkin's *Sacred Void* with a beautifully illustrated paper on

the enduring role of Giriama (Mijikenda group) forests as virtual or imagined living spaces. Zulfikar Hirji's paper on Tehreema Mitha, a Pakistani-born and USA-based South Asian classical and contemporary dancer-choreographer, captured everyone's imagination with beautiful video images, and spoke directly to Parkin's long-standing concern with ritual and performance as well as his more recent engagement with transnational cultural forms. Katrin Hansing contributed *in absentia* via a projection of her 2009 film on Freddy Ilanga, who had by then lived in Cuba for 40 years, having arrived as a young man after serving as Che Guevara's Swahili translator during the latter's secret mission in the Congo in 1965. Richard Fardon led David Parkin down memories of their SOAS years in an informal discussion punctuated by much laughter from the participants, and the day ended with a buffet dinner at Wolfson College.

Knut Christian Myhre opened the second day with a paper on Chagga notions of genealogy, relationality and personhood, all central themes in the anthropology of the region, which Myhre revisited here with Parkinian attention to semantics. Lola Martinez read a paper by Christine Obbo on changes in mourning and funeral practices following the HiV/AIDS pandemic in Uganda. Nadine Beckman talked about notions of responsibility and care of the self among HiV-positive people in Tanzania, and Elisabeth Hsu presented a final paper on the ambiguous trajectories of Chinese medical practitioners, also in Tanzania. The half-day ended with a conversation between David Parkin and Wendy James in which his former colleague traced the history of ISCA before Parkin's time, and paid tribute to his leading role in turning Oxford into the largest department of Anthropology in Britain.

Whilst the workshop clearly spoke to David Parkin's championing of anthropology as a holistic endeavour, the discussions that followed individual contributions brought out thematic continuities in his work and that of his students, and paid tribute to his unique ability to show us how an understanding of the social world requires that we pay careful attention to how things may be expressed 'sideways'.