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## Reviews

**Ethnography and the Historical Imagination** by JOHN and JEAN COMAROFF

Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, Westview Press, 1992. Pp. xiv + 337.  
\$63.50/£43.00. \$18.95/£12.95 paperback.

This book is a collection of previously published articles which have been presented with a new introduction aimed at rescuing ethnography from recent attacks, particularly those emanating from 'deconstruction and critical post-modernism'. It seeks to locate the ethnographic enterprise within the disciplinary boundaries of historical anthropology, in which the basic terms of culture and ethnography are revitalised. John and Jean Comaroff argue that the methodology deployed is 'emphatically *neomodern*', constructing 'imaginative sociologies of terrains' which cut across simple dichotomies that have characterised anthropology. Hence, they seek to offer a more nuanced account of colonialism by contextualising it within an historical ethnography which is 'more or less complex, familiar and strange, local and global – accounts at once social and cultural, both imaginative in their grasp of the interior worlds of others and yet... respectful of the real' (p. ix). Yet, although critical about the futility of universalising theory, the authors, entrapped by their desire to rescue ethnography, ultimately fall victim to the very attacks that they have been attempting consciously to deflect.

*Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* is divided into three parts: 1, Theory, Ethnography, Historiography; 2, Dialectical Systems, Imaginative Sociologies; and 3, Colonialism and Modernity. The initial theory chapter maps out the terrain the authors wish to traverse. They posit that their construction of historical ethnography forces 'us' to evaluate the impact of anthropology on western culture which is linked inextricably with the 'rest', and challenge themselves 'to explain the great conjunctures, the processes and practices through which have been fashioned the significant social phenomena of our times, both global and local' (p. 45).

The remaining chapters are an ensemble of essays (most published previously, and some revised) organised in such a manner so as to drive home the Comaroff's argument of the imperative of a historical ethnography. Their main focus is on the anthropology of empire and, in particular, on the nineteenth-century relationship between evangelical colonialism and the peoples of the South African interior, the Tswana. The authors' project, Marxist and structural in orientation, follows the colonisers from the metropole to Africa and back. In the event, they explore the images held by the Nonconformist missionaries and the manner in which they deployed notions of the 'civilising mission' in South Africa, and then the reverberations of the missionaries back to the centre where the images of Africa are reconstructed.

Where Tswana voices are given space, their experiences, despite the Comaroffs' assertion of the importance of de-universalising theory, are reduced to or explained in deeply embedded western conceptions. For

example, in a lively discussion in chapter 5, 'Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods', the cultural experiences and relationships of the Tshidi with animals are reduced to an analysis of the rôle of cattle as commodities animated as cash. In chapter 6, 'The Madman and the Migrant', where the authors are concerned with 'the poetics of history', the Tshidi's sense of themselves is trivialised by representation of certain categories of their culture. In part 3, the western preoccupation with the body is taken to the periphery, and the logic of a modern historical movement is explored through the medium of bodily signs. In chapter 8, 'Medicine, Colonialism, and the Black Body', the development of British colonialism in Africa as a cultural enterprise is represented as being inseparable from the rise of biomedicine by exploring the relationship of medicine and imperialism on the South African frontier.

These examples illustrate the need of ethnographers to reduce 'other' cultural experiences and relationships in their 'own' terms. In essence, there is, methodologically, an inability to permit other voices to speak for themselves or rather to recognise, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak does, that they cannot – see 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL, 1988). Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the way that the Comaroffs have attempted to construct a universal anthropology of colonial capitalism.

Anthropology's persistence with searching for 'primitive' peoples untouched by 'civilisation' and ethnography's confident gaze secure in the power of its 'superior' wisdom, revolved around a central juxtaposition of 'us' and 'them', where knowledge about 'them' was accumulated by and reported to 'us'. Furthermore, the connections between empire and anthropology are indicative of claims that the latter was essentially a science that studied and interpreted the former. This attack has since been reinforced by what is generally referred to as the 'crisis of representation' in anthropology. As Talal Asad (ed.) claimed in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London, 1973), p. 15, the discipline was 'carried out by Europeans for a European audience of non-European societies dominated by European power'. Hence the not-unsurprising remark by Edward Said that perhaps 'anthropology as we have known it can only continue on one side of the imperial divide, there to remain as a partner in domination and hegemony – see 'Representing the Colonized: anthropology's interlocutors', in *Critical Inquiry* (Chicago), 15, Winter 1989, pp. 205–25.

The authors' own account of the difficulty in constructing an historical ethnography is illustrative of the inherent tensions that exist in such a project. Critically, one constantly ponders what would have emerged if the focus had been shifted to allow African voices to speak for themselves, rather than relying on missionaries and their evangelising efforts. In short, despite the attempt by John and Jean Comaroff to contextualise their work in a neo-modern anthropology sensitive to historical processes, what is desperately omitted is *African* history, which can only arise after the decolonisation of theory.

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