

A TRIBUTE TO VICTOR TURNER (1920-1983)

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Cet article présente une courte esquisse bibliographique pour résumer certains rôles importants que Victor W. Turner a joué dans diverses disciplines et quelques-unes de ses principales contributions théoriques. En mettant l'accent sur la nature originale et interdisciplinaire des thèses de Turner sur la théorie du rituel et sur la symbologie comparée, l'article soutient que l'héritage de Turner constitue une des grandes contributions de notre ère à la théorie du social.

This article uses a brief biographical sketch to summarize some of the major disciplinary affiliations and theoretical contributions of Victor W. Turner. By highlighting the originality and interdisciplinary nature of Turner's advances in ritual theory and comparative symbology, the article assesses Turner's legacy as one of the great contributors to modern social theory.

The death of Victor Turner came as a great shock to scholars around the world. Described as a "creative maverick," a "polymath," and an "iconoclast," Turner was recognized as one of the leading anthropological exponents of symbolic analysis and ritual studies. In describing his own style of symbolic analysis, Turner preferred the term "comparative symbology." His work was epochal, inaugurating a new era in the understanding of both preliterate and contemporary cultural forms. By laying the groundwork for a new dispensation connecting the processual dimensions of Van Gennep's rites of passage to modern theater, history, literature, and the performative dimensions of everyday life, Turner signed the anthropology of his time with his own unique stamp. Ronald L. Grimes (see "Victor Turner's Social Drama and T. S. Elliot's Ritual Drama" by Ronald L. Grimes in this volume of *Anthropologica*) offers the following description of Turner's contribution to ritual scholarship:

Turner is an academic fool. He has stood on his head and told us that rituals are not seedbeds of change; that rituals not only control process, they generate it; that rituals not only mark boundaries, they evoke phasic motion in a culture. (1982:202)

As an author and coauthor, Turner bequeathed some twenty books and monographs to scholarship. For over thirty years, he

also wrote reviews, editorial forewords, journal articles, and commentaries. The caliber of his work was so outstanding that his name was eventually entered into dictionaries and encyclopedias as a standard reference. While most of his work treated broad themes in religious studies and political anthropology, Turner also produced a sagacious sampling of writings on theater and the dramatic characteristics of everyday life (e.g., the anthropology of experience). His fundamental grasp of developments in numerous academic domains was nothing less than prodigious. Grimes makes an understatement when he comments that Turner has "grounded his theoretical formulations in large amounts of carefully studied data without becoming lost in them" (1982:133).

Like Marshall McLuhan, Turner was a true interdisciplinary scholar. Both men had a penchant, amounting to genius, for eschewing disciplinary endogamy and opening up the study of humankind to eclectic approaches that encompass the liberal arts as well as the "hard" sciences. It is to Turner's credit that he has been—and will no doubt continue to be—regularly referenced in works dealing with hitherto discrete or only marginally-connected academic domains.

Victor Witter Turner was born in Glasgow, Scotland on May 28, 1920. His father was an electronics engineer and his mother, an actress. During World War II, military service interrupted his formal education at University College, London, where he had begun his study of poetry and classics at the age of eighteen. Conscripted for five years as a noncombatant, Turner lived in a gypsy caravan near the army base at Rugby with his wife, Edith, and his first two children (Manning 1984:20). After the war, he switched from literature to anthropology, working basically within the Anglo-American anthropological tradition. After completing an honors degree in anthropology at the University of London at age twenty-nine, he began his career as a research officer at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). It was here that he undertook his highly celebrated two-and-one-half-year study of the Lunda-Ndembu, shifting from demography and economics to ritual symbolism and effecting "a transition that appears to have coincided with his alienation from Marxism and his growing conviction that the symbolic expression of shared meanings, not the attraction of material interests, lie at the center of human relationships" (Manning 1984:20; see "The Performance of Politics: Caribbean Music and the Anthropology of Victor Turner" by Frank E. Manning in this volume of *Anthropologica*).

Later, Turner went on to study at the University of Manchester. Max Gluckman, former Director of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, and leader of what became known as the "Manchester School" of British social anthropology, was the head of the anthropology department during Turner's student days at Manchester. Under the influence of Gluckman's ideas, Turner

completed his Ph.D. in June 1955. He then stayed on at Manchester for several years as a Senior Fellow and Senior Lecturer. His work formed the basis of two monographs as well as his Ph.D. thesis, which then became the perdurable work, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (1957). During this period, Turner worked under the tutelage of some of the leading anthropologists of the day, including Raymond Firth, Daryll Forde, Meyer Fortes, Edmund Leach, S. F. Nadel, and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown.

In 1961, Turner traveled to California, where he had received an appointment as a Fellow for Advanced Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, and where he wrote his seminal work, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes Among the Ndembu of Zambia* (1968). Although he returned to Manchester a year later, he continued to be attracted to the interdisciplinary nature of American academic life. Predictably, he returned to the United States, and in 1963 accepted an appointment in the Department of Anthropology at Cornell University.

Five years later, Turner changed appointments by accepting a position at the University of Chicago as Professor of Social Thought and Anthropology. At Chicago, he sat on a prestigious six-member committee which included such notables as novelist Saul Bellow, philosopher Hannah Arendt, and art critic Harold Rosenberg. Turner's move to Chicago "coincided with a shift of interest from 'tribal' to 'world' religions, and more generally, from small scale to mass societies" (Manning 1984:21). His final appointment was at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, where he was awarded the William R. Kenyan, Jr. Chair of Anthropology in 1971, and was also given memberships in the Department of Religion, the Center for Advanced Studies, and the South Asia Program.

Turner was a member of the Royal Anthropological Institute, which awarded him the Rivers Memorial Medal in 1965. He was a Fellow of numerous academic organizations, including the Association of Social Anthropologists of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, the Royal Anthropological Institute, the International African Institute, the American Anthropological Association, the American Ethnological Society, the New York Academy of Sciences, the African Studies Association of America, the Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Society for the Study of Religion, the American Folklore Association, the Explorer's Club, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. He was also an Einstein Fellow at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, and a Fellow of the Society for the Humanities.

Turner was trained in the school of British functionalist rationalism, and his early anthropological fieldwork reflected a

structural-functionalist approach. Eventually he steered away from attempts to understand culture as a functional or static moment frozen in time, and preferred instead to conceive of cultural, literary, and artistic genres as "processes." Throughout the remainder of his career, he continued to assail the limitations of structural functionalism and to stress the concepts of indeterminacy, reflexivity, and "becoming" in his work. This change of direction was greatly influenced by Arnold Van Gennep's work on rites of passage (1960), by the philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey (1976), and by the pioneering efforts of Gregory Bateson (1972) and his followers in the development of cybernetic systems theory.

Turner's concept of liminality (including its close cognates, anti-structure and *communitas*) has been avidly accepted by scholars in anthropology, liberal arts, religious studies, and performance studies. In fact, this concept is now quite commonplace in scholarly discourse. One of Turner's most audacious discriminations was his distinction between the sensory (orectic) and ideological (normative) poles of the ritual symbol, and his explanation of how these two poles mutually tincture one another, thereby fusing the normative with the sensory and the moral with the material. Turner maintained that during the interchange between these two poles, the conceptual is given the power of the experiential and vice versa, thus making the obligatory desirable. Many scholars have found these and other Turnerian theories efficacious for examining contemporary social settings. In the end, Turner will probably best be remembered for his work on social drama and the role of metaphor in assigning meaning to social behavior and conduct.

Turner ascribed a great deal of importance to analyzing and understanding contemporary ritual forms in both religious and non-religious settings. Holding the crystal of culture up to the light of modern scholarship, he gave it a slight twist so that the images of the sacred could be seen as reflected in the events of secular life. His celebrated infatuation with symbols, rituals, and social dramas eventually led to his watershed essay, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), which was originally delivered as the 1966 Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures at the University of Rochester. Many years and many books later, we find the study of humankind broadened and illuminated by his peerless research.

Turner was an extraordinarily gifted field-worker. He considered ethnography as something to be "performed" rather than to be simply codified into a written text. In his later years, he worked with Richard Schechner, an experimental theater director and performance theorist at New York University (see "Victor Turner's Last Adventure" by Richard Schechner in this volume of *Anthropologica*), and became engaged in writing and performing scripts based on his ethnographic fieldwork. The results of

Turner's collaboration with Schechner can be found in his book, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982). Turner's own fieldwork echoed his theories of play and subjunctivity, as it assumed a creative lucidity that was often path-finding in both its expressiveness and insight.

As a Catholic, Turner's religiousness was strengthened by his fieldwork among the Ndembu, where he gained a new appreciation for the power of the ritual process. Liturgical scholars such as Mary Collins continue to cite Turner's writings on ritual in their attempts to reform the Catholic Mass. In his later work, Turner examined the dynamics of Christian pilgrimage and undertook field expeditions to Mexico, Ireland, Britain, and various parts of Europe. Several studies on this topic were coauthored with his wife, Edith. He also became interested in pilgrimage within Asian religions, and went on field expeditions to India, Sri Lanka, and Japan. His last writings were on the Rio *Carnaval* and the topics of creativity and festivity.

Turner disagreed with contemporaries Max Gluckman and Raymond Firth, who claimed that dramatic analysis was too "loaded" and not "neutral" enough for scientific use. He argued that social dramas were evident on all levels of social organization. Some of today's most influential drama educators can now be described as symbolic consociates of Turner, working under the influence of the Turnerian vulgate, whose doctrines are directed at understanding ritual and drama as a cluster of symbols. For example, Canadian drama educator Richard Courtney owes a particular allegiance to Turner's innovative research.

As the theoretical trajectories from Turner's work continue to converge around numerous disciplinary fields and create an atmosphere of intellectual ferment, religionists, anthropologists, semiologists, performance theorists, and drama educators remain indebted to the work of this unique man who strode so knowingly and with such profound insight across the frontier of culture.

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