Résumé
L. Switzer — Éthologie culturelle et culture africaine.
Partant de la recension de l'étude monographique d'un groupe tswana d'Afrique du Sud par un auteur se réclamant du
marxisme, L. S. critique, par implication, l'abus, fréquent dans la littérature contemporaine, d'une certaine langue de bois et
d'automatismes stéréotypiques tenant lieu d'explication.

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Les Switzer

Cultural Studies and African Culture*

Critical research in African studies has become increasingly preoccupied in recent years in trying to unravel the reactions and responses of the mass of ordinary African workers to the penetration of Western colonialism, capitalism and culture. The Marxist critique, in particular, has begun to focus more narrowly on the complex interplay between culture, consciousness and class in the struggles for power within and beyond the African continent. Culture in this context, however, is not merely a backdrop to the struggle. It is the principal arena of combat—a material (political and economic) and a conscious (ideological) manifestation—of the encounter between the forces of dominance and dependency in the neo-colonial periphery.

Comaroff, a social anthropologist, offers a penetrating analysis of the cultural struggles of one such African community—the Barolong boo Ratshidi (or Tshidi)—, a Tswana chiefdom located in the rural periphery of Southern Africa. She depicts the history of the Tshidi at one level as a metaphor of the world capitalist system. Developed metropole and underdeveloping periphery—the one feeding off the other and the few expropriating from the many—are positioned in the history of the Tshidi over a period of 150 years. But Comaroff moves far beyond simplistic, dichotomous notions of dominance and subordination—the one ever active and the other ever passive—in this case study.

The structures of power as well as the structures of resistance are conceptualized at complex and contradictory levels of abstraction. She offers an intriguing, and at times compelling, analysis of the reciprocal relationship between material forces and cultural forms in the ritualized practices of the Tshidi from ca. 1800-1830 to the present.

In the end, however, the book is seriously flawed by weaknesses in theory and methodology, in the organization of material and, above all, in writing style. Comaroff simply cannot communicate her story in a way that will be accessible to her audience.

The introductory chapter on theory and methodology, for example, presents a formidable challenge even to those who are reasonably familiar with the revisionist perspective on Southern Africa. The language used is turgid and frequently opaque, and the density of her writing often obscures meaning. The argot of Marxist cultural studies theorists saturates these pages but Comaroff rarely feels


the need to express the content of their ideas in ways that might be enlightening to the reader.

Terms like 'social practice', 'human practice' and 'signifying practice' (or 'cultural mediation' vs. 'symbolic mediation', 'synchronic models' vs. 'teleological models', 'body personal', 'body natural', 'body social') are not defined at the outset and it is not immediately clear whether these phrases mean the same thing. Tortuous sentences/paragraphs intrude in ways that obscure rather than clarify the theoretical concepts the author is trying to elucidate—as in the following passage outlining the main theme of the book:

'I have focused primarily upon social action as communicative process, in which the pragmatic and semantic dimensions are fused. It is in practice that the principles governing objective orders of power relations take cultural form, playing upon the capacity of signs—their polysemic quality, for instance, and the meaning they acquire through their positioning in relation to each other in sequences or texts. But this process of construction [...] involves the reciprocal interaction of subjects and their objective context; and it may serve both to consolidate existing hegemonies (ruling definitions of the "natural") and to give shape to resistance or reform' (pp. 5-6).

Comaroff tries to convince the reader in the last sentence of this chapter that 'the very purpose of this introduction has been to render my perspectives as unambiguous as possible' (p. 14). Unfortunately, this attempt at a theoretical framework has cast a 'prisonhouse of language', as it were, on the rest of the book.

Consider the notions of hegemony and ideology—crucial components of analysis. Comaroff does not bother to define or develop these concepts. Hegemony—and Gramsci's seminal role in constructing a theory of cultural hegemony to suggest how dominant social groups might win the allegiance of the dominated masses in a given social formation—is virtually ignored. The cultural theorists employed to develop a theory of ideology, moreover, are lumped together without due consideration of their differences (e.g. Althusser and Foucault). Key approaches to the study of cultural texts (such as hermeneutics) and contributing scholars (like Hall and Habermas) are also largely ignored.

**Hegemony**

The concept of hegemony, for example, should have been clarified for the reader at the outset because it is crucial to Comaroff's analysis. Hegemonic crises occurred in Tshidi society, moreover, during the precapitalist (precapitalist) as well as the colonial and neocolonial periods.

In Gramscian terms, the hegemonic State contains forces that are both consensual and coercive, and one or the other might feature more prominently in any given historical epoch—a point that Comaroff never addresses, for example, in relation to the South African State. In contemporary capitalist States, only the weakest resort to coercion. For Gramsci, the hegemonic State is more of a unifying force—mediating conflict while actively and positively seeking to gain support from all the constituted classes in the social formation. A hegemonic State, then, is primarily dependent on the consent of the governed.

The cultural institutions of a given society are the arbiters of a hegemonic consensus. These agencies are private as well as public and they include the family, schools, churches, political parties, labor unions, sports associations and, of course, the mass media. They represent the agencies of persuasion in the social formation and they can be contrasted with the agencies of coercion controlled more directly by the State—including the administrative bureaucracy, military, policy, judiciary and penal system.
The main task of these cultural institutions is to legitimate the social order in the consciousness and in the actions of the subordinate masses. Gramsci's vision of the hegemonic State, however, also embraced the concept of ambiguity. The process of legitimation which he called 'abstract consciousness' was in conflict with objective reality which he called 'situational consciousness'. The resulting 'contradictory consciousness' of 'man-in-the-mass' was both an expression of commitment and ambivalence to the status quo. For Gramsci, hegemony did not require the active support of the subordinate masses. Compliance was sufficient. In the 'situational consciousness', however, could be discerned the seeds of both accommodation with and resistance against the hegemonic State (Femia 1975).

In the Gramscian schema hegemonic cultures are situated in a continuum. In 'closed' hegemonic cultures, subordinate groups lack the language necessary even to conceive concerted resistance. In 'open' hegemonic cultures, 'the capability for resistance flourishes and may lead to the creation of counterhegemonic alternatives' (Lears 1985: 574). All contemporary States, then, are hegemonic to some degree. For Gramsci, the modern capitalist State is 'hegemony protected by coercion' (cited by Lears 1985: 570).

**Ideology**

Ideology for Comaroff is the 'coercive dimension of society and culture' and 'most effective when it remains interred in habit, and hence "has no need of words"'. She also indicates she will 'rethink the relationship between ideology as explicit discourse and as lived experience' (p. 5). But she doesn't really consider the contradictions generated by the use of ideology in Marxist cultural studies. Above all, we are not given a succinct definition of the term and we are not told explicitly how it will be employed in relation to the Tshidi.

One must assume that Comaroff favors what has been called the discursive approach to the interpretation of cultural texts. All material and non-material elements of Tshidi culture—whether it be the use of the plow, the growing of grain, the acquiring of literacy, the making of money or the rites of manhood—are ideological referents. The struggle within and between these cultural texts represents 'a struggle over the power to constitute experience', as Grossberg, for example, puts it. Culture is both 'the structures of experience' and 'experience itself' (Grossberg 1984: 409).

Structures of power—of dominance and subordination—do not appear to exist outside these texts. In the base-superstructure metaphor, the discursive strategy essentially collapses base into superstructure and positions all economic, political and cultural phenomena in the realm of experience. For this reviewer, the objective reality of the social relations of production, for example, appears to be lost when the class struggle is reduced to the power to articulate meaning in experience.

Stuart Hall, one of the more lucid interpreters of the Althusserian position, might have been used by the author to develop her notion of ideology. He offers a coherent definition that at least approaches the position Comaroff takes in this book:

'By ideology I mean the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works [...] [But ideology also involves] the processes by which new forms of consciousness, new conceptions of the world, arise, which move the masses of the people into historical action against the prevailing system' (Hall 1983: 59).
Having defined the concept, Comaroff might then have suggested how ideology involves the processes by which the structures of dominance and dependency are confirmed—and denied—in the social formation. Hall, of course, broke away from the classical Marxist position on the 'necessary correspondence' between social class and ideology which was exemplified by cultural theorists like Raymond Williams (cited but not explained in context by Comaroff). Hall insisted there was no perfect correspondence between the social relations of production and the working out of these social relations in everyday life. He rejected the view that the position of a social class in the relations of production would necessarily determine its ideology or that each social class had a distinct ideology (which if not manifested was 'false consciousness').

Hall's explanation of the concept of ideology suggests how we might define some of the terms employed by Comaroff in her introduction. Thus ideology is a 'system of representation' revealed in language (a 'signifying practice') and inscribed in behavior (a 'social practice'). Numerous ideologies are present in the social formation and these discourses compete with and borrow from each other in the struggle for ideological supremacy:

'... ideologies are systems of representation materialized in practices [...] a variety of different ideological systems [...] are available in any social formation. The notion of the dominant ideology and the subordinated ideology is an inadequate way of representing the complex interplay of different ideological discourses [...] Nor is the terrain of ideology constituted as a field of mutually exclusive and internally self-sustaining discursive chains. They contest one another, often drawing on a common, shared repertoire of concepts' (Hall 1985: 104).

Ideology, then, is 'lived experience' which can be represented in a variety of ways. All lived experiences, however, are ideological representations:

'It is not possible to bring ideology to an end and simply live the real. We always need systems through which we represent what the real is to ourselves and to others [...] when we contrast ideology to experience, or illusion to authentic truth, we are failing to recognize that there is no way of experiencing the "real relations" of a particular society outside of its cultural and ideological categories' (ibid.: 104-105).

Social relations in capitalist (and presumably precapitalist) formations exist as an objective reality 'independent of mind, independent of thought', but 'they can only be conceptualized in thought, in the head' as an ideological representation (ibid.: 105). Ideology, then, is the language of the class struggle. Ideological discourses are inherited in part at birth—hence they do function at some level to reproduce the social relations of production. But ideological systems—whether dominant or subordinate—are also 'relatively autonomous' sites of struggle the outcomes of which cannot be determined in advance.

'There are no fixed meanings or class-ascribed ideologies. Language itself —'the medium of thought and ideological calculation' (Hall 1983: 78)—is an arena of struggle—a 'war of position' (Gramsci's phrase) between ideological referents that are necessarily pragmatic, ambiguous and even contradictory. In the process, individuals (and communities) consume and interpolate fragments of numerous ideologies in the ongoing process of trying to make sense of the world to themselves and to others:

'Ruling ideas are not guaranteed their dominance by their already given coupling with ruling classes. Rather, the effective coupling of dominant ideas
to the historical bloc which has acquired hegemonic power in a particular period is what the process of ideological struggle is intended to secure. It is the object of the exercise—not the playing out of an already written and concluded script’ (Hall 1983: 82).

Dominating ideologies, then, are 'signifying systems' that seek to communicate, explore, experience and hopefully reproduce the dominant cultures that maintain the social order. The world we create for ourselves—our culture—is expressed as ideology.

Hall stopped short of the attempt by Foucault and others to merge culture and society completely in the realm of experience. Thus he does not develop a theory of ideology to the point where all political, economic and cultural phenomena are embodied in the realm of consciousness—the strategy apparently adopted by Comaroff. Nevertheless, some consideration of the various approaches to the interpretation of ideology in Marxist cultural studies seems essential if the reader is to understand how the term is to be used in relation to the ritual practices of the Tshidi.

Comaroff's unwillingness to translate key theoretical concepts or provide meaningful contexts for the reader in clear, standard English extends to other areas—such as the significance of a theory of 'signs' (semiology) for cultural theorists and the rationale for having a theory of the 'body social' and the 'body personal' in studying the signifying practices of Tshidi ritual. And she never tells her readers explicitly that cultural theorists focus their analysis on the interpretation and significance of cultural texts in an effort to explain the mediation of dominant and subordinate cultures within a given social formation.

Texts and Contexts

The focus of cultural studies—and of this book—is the relationship between these texts and their contexts in the precapitalist Tshidi formation and in its interaction with the dominating forces of the South African capitalist State. In unpacking cultural texts, the researcher is made aware of the endless ambiguities involved in communication. Even though language is shaped in part by the structures of power, it cannot be reduced to simple categories reflecting dominant or dependent modes of belief and behavior.

It would have been useful if, at the outset, Comaroff had summarized for the reader the basic elements of coercion and persuasion in the precapitalist Tshidi chieftdom and how these were to be reconstituted in articulation with 'the advancing capitalist system' (p. 2). Instead, she summarily informs the reader that in 'the precolonial social system [...] human relations were not pervasively mediated by commodities and dominant symbols unified man, spirit, and nature in a mutually effective, continuous order of being' (ibid.).

Was this really the case? A number of recent studies (e.g. Marks & Atmore 1980) suggest that precolonial African societies fell short of this ideal. Comaroff herself offers some compelling examples of how social control was maintained in the discussion on precolonial Tshidi cosmology and ritual (e.g. in the subordination of women), but she does not suggest in the introductory chapter how relevant this evidence might be in determining the nature of dominance and consensus in the precolonial Tshidi sociocultural system.

The bulk of the book is divided into three sections. Part 1 deals mainly with Tshidi society more or less immediately prior to the arrival of the European ca. 1800-1830. Comaroff opts to separate what she calls 'event history' from 'structure'. Her event history (ch. 2), however, is a descriptive outline of events from 1800 to the present. Her analysis of the Tshidi political economy and sociocultural order (ch. 3-4) is restricted to the precolonial period.
The reader, then, is treated to a summary of events impacting on the history of the Tshidi which is artificially separated from any meaningful historical or cultural framework. Chapter 2 is inadequate as history and chapters 3-4 lack an integrative, historical context. Others who have faced similar problems (e.g. Peires 1981 and Beinart 1982 on the Xhosa) at least tried to maintain chronological integrity.

Part 2 attempts to redress this weakness, although unfortunately Comaroff tries to cover the whole of the colonial and early postcolonial period in one chapter. The bulk of the chapter, moreover, centers on the mission enterprise. Nevertheless, in the opinion of this reviewer, chapter 5 (and to some extent chapter 4 which deals with precolonial ritual) is one of the most interesting sections in the book. Comaroff effectively explains how 'cultural mediation' and 'symbolic practice' operated in what she calls the indigenous ritual complex.

The material and symbolic manifestations of power were located in these rituals which were the signifying practices of Tshidi culture. As material manifestations, they were located, for example, in cattle—a 'comprehensive icon' of social relations (p. 125). As symbolic manifestations, they were located, for example, in healing, ancestral sacrifice, firstfruits and initiation ceremonies.

The Methodist mission enters this world and transforms it. Comaroff shows how 'the cultural images of industrial capitalism prefigured in the ideology and organization of the mission' (p. 129); how literacy reified 'speech and knowledge' (p. 144) and (like money) drove a wedge between language and reality. Mission culture, however, was interpreted in a number of different ways by the Tshidi. Comaroff suggests how different social classes among the Tshidi responded to the word, as it were, and how they made use of it at material and symbolic levels.

The configurations of Methodist ideology in 19th-century Britain (pp. 132-135 sq.) should have been linked to the evolving British metropolitan and Cape liberal traditions (e.g. Trapido 1980), and the 'dualism' of late-18th/19th-century Protestantism (p. 131), of course, is far older than is implied in this summary. There are a number of other scholars, moreover, who have studied the mission's impact on African societies in South Africa (e.g. Etherington 1978) but were not cited. Nevertheless, Comaroff provides a subtle and ultimately convincing portrait of the articulation of two distinctly different sociocultural systems.

In terms of historical specificity, then, the first two sections (ch. 1-5) would have meant much more to this reviewer if 'event' and 'structure' had been integrated and organized chronologically around crucial turning points in Southern African history—e.g. chapters on the periods ca. 1800-1830, 1830-1870, 1870-1930, 1930-1970. After all, this is really background, albeit essential background, to Part 3—Comaroff's fieldwork on contemporary Tshidi ritual practices and their meaning for the resistance movement.

Most Coherent

Part 3 (ch. 6-8) is by far the most coherent section in the book. The narrative is relatively free of jargon, and Comaroff manages to provide a readable and personalized synthesis of the symbolic and material in modern Tshidi culture. The focus of this section is on independent African churches—the Zionists—and how their 'coded forms' of worship attempt 'to address and redress experiential conflict' (pp. 262-263).

Comaroff concludes by suggesting that in the Tshidi 'we confront the coherent response [...] of a large sector of the population on the cultural and economic fringe. This is the universe of the marginalized of the modern world system, in some respects a laterday sequel to the making of the European working classes' (p. 263).
In her approach to culture, Comaroff's book is a landmark in African studies. Few researchers have even attempted to employ the theoretical insights of cultural theorists in examining the messages of African mass culture. All the things that a reviewer looks for in a really solid scholarly work, moreover, are here. Thus Comaroff's book deserves to be read even by those who are not specialists in Southern Africa. One suspects, however, that very few will make the effort.

*University of Houston, Texas, 1987.*

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