
Only in the Soviet Union and in South Africa scholars (and politicians) operate with a reified concept of ethnicity which they call etnos. The article first documents the etiological relationship of Soviet and South African etnos 'theories', which both draw from the work of the Russian émigré ethnologist S. M. Širokogorov, although in a slanted way. In both Soviet etnografija and South African volkekunde, etnos is aware of its distinctiveness and has its own origin and culture. Most important, intrinsic features of etnos are its self-awareness and psychological identity both perceived subjectively by members of any etnos. The article then shows etnos 'theories' in both countries as political myths serving to justify the status quo and the policies of their governments as ruling parties. Soviet etnos 'theory' is designed to support the myth of the supra-ethnic category of the 'Soviet people', while South African volkekundiges (ethnologists) similarly speculate about the formation of a South African nation.

E. POUILLON — Census and Power, or Why Nomadic Pastors Cannot Count their Cattle.

Why is it so hard to get information from nomadic pastors on the size of their herds? The explanation usually given seeming entirely inadequate, fieldwork data from different African pastoral societies—the Bedouins of Arabia and the Maghreb, and the Fulbe of the West African Sahel—are used to examine this problem. This behavior is in fact related to the mode of appropriation in these societies, an appropriation which is always relative and shared, without a one man—one head of cattle correspondence. Furthermore, it is the governments which try to force cattle numbering on the pastoralists in order to gain a foothold in their economies. Thus, no wonder that they are reluctant to submit to such an imposition.

E. FASSIN & D. FASSIN — From the Quest for Legitimation to the Question of Legitimacy: 'Traditional' Therapies in Senegal.

The quest for new forms of recognition for traditional therapists raises the question of the relations between the different kinds of medical practices and, more precisely, that of medical legitimacy. Through three case studies carried out in Senegal, the authors attempt to show how principles of legitimation are defined today with, as essential characteristics: recognition of the least legitimate of the healers, strengthening of the legitimator's authority, and recourse to legitimating bodies outside of the medical field. This analysis shows the inanity of the classical modern/traditional opposition and leads to an examination of the meaning of a legitimacy crisis which seems to affect both doctors and healers.

A. Mary — The ‘Reverse Birth’ Model: Initiation process and the logic of inversion.

‘Reverse birth’ constitutes one of the most pervasive models in the initiation process and ritual of the Bwiti cult of the Fang (Gabon). Enactment of this inversion of biological birth which coincides with death draws less on a dramatization of a return to the mother’s womb, Nyingone Mebeghe, than on diverse topological figures which operate on the reversibility of the spatial opposition between ‘the wrong side out’ and ‘the right side out’, connected to the crossing of thresholds and of openings in a ritual space, and also on the interplay of inputs/outputs and the displacements of the body as a shifter of inversion. The demultiplication of signifiers of the ceremonial space and the redundancy of the schemes which structure the various temporal dimensions (biological, existential, historical) evoked by the rite, draw on a logic of fragmentation and repetition serving the scheme of the overlap of the opposites life/death. The ambivalence inherent in the model of ‘reverse birth’ finally appears to be at the basis of the paradoxical superimposition of the ‘inversion-regression’ into the maternal womb (the path to initiatory conversion and to salvation), and of the ‘inversion-subversion’ of the order instituted by the ancestor Nzame. By dramatizing the specular relationship between opposites, ritual inversion actualizes the return of the Other to the Same.