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On Griaule on Trial¹

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Van Beek, as a member of an interdisciplinary Dutch research team, has done fieldwork among the Dogon of Mali on several occasions since 1979. His focus is on the cultural aspects of ecology, and his interest in religion is motivated by an interest in "the survival strategies of the Dogon." With this experience behind him, he has publicly arraigned his famous predecessor Marcel Griaule (CA 32:139–58, 163–65). Accusing Griaule of having "perceived fieldwork as a military operation" (p. 153), he himself can be accused of trying to "nail" the defendant rather than calmly presenting the case. He claims to be fair: he admits the evidence of Griaule's first writings and of the last book written by Griaule's closest associate, Germaine Dieterlen (1982). The two books he incriminates are *Dieu d'eau* (henceforth *DE*) (Griaule 1948) and *Le renard pâle* (henceforth *RP*) (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965).

Van Beek's case is built on his experience of having lived not far from Sanga, where Griaule and Dieterlen worked, but having been unable to find any trace of their discoveries among his own informants. Pointing out internal contradictions in Griaule's and Dieterlen's publications, van Beek concludes that *DE* is incompatible with *RP*. He declares that the myths recounted in these books cannot be taken seriously because nothing of the sort has ever been described for other African societies: "no comparable set of myths, no such intricate web of associations between myth and institutions, has ever been found" (p. 142). This argument is odd indeed. If it holds, then one should also question the existence of village-level polyandry among the Lele of Kasai, which an unquestionably serious ethnographer (Douglas 1963) has described.

Let us concede, however, that the Dogon, along with a few neighboring peoples that, according to Dieterlen, have preserved the ancient pre-Islamic Mande religious system, are exceptional. Rather than rejecting, with a stroke of the pen, the complexity of the Dogon system, van Beek—even though he is interested in ecology—should have inquired into the nature of symbolism. The extraordinary genesis of the cosmos described in *DE* and *RP* can ultimately be reduced to a vast classificatory system that is exceptional only in that it is so meticulous. This did not surprise Lévi-Strauss (1962:53–54), who, in reference to the "logic of totemic classifications," mentioned Griaule's, Dieterlen's, and Zahan's research in the former French Sudan. In fact, symbolic thought can be expressed in many ways, for example,

through a set of prohibitions covering all of social life. Concluding an insightful analysis of Rwanda, Smith (1949:43) maintains that Rwandan prohibitions (*imiziro*) give rise to

an effect of the same order as that which, in other cultures, is proposed by the major systems of symbolic correspondences (for instance, in ancient China, among the Dogon, etc.) where each element, substance, color, sex, body part, season, etc., is assigned a particular symbolic value and found, through a set of correspondences and oppositions, in equations with the others.

True, the Bantu in general have not been preoccupied with myths as such, but Turner (1967) has offered an exegesis of rites among the Ndembu of Zambia. And, once again, Lévi-Strauss (1971:598, my translation) points out that

mythology may appear in two distinct ways. Sometimes it is explicit and consists of tales that are so important and so internally organized that they are full-fledged works. Sometimes, on the contrary, mythical representations exist only in the form of notes, sketches, or fragments. Instead of a guiding line relating these to each other, each is still linked to such and such a ritual phase, for which it is a gloss, and it is only during ritual acts that these mythical representations will be evoked.

Clearly, the *RP*'s vast reconstruction of Dogon cosmology is grounded in such an implicit mythology, as the authors explain (p. 42): Dogon thought is a body of knowledge (*sophie*) based on tales, called "wonderful words" (*paroles étonnantes*), that are considered true stories in which God has a primordial place. We can regret that Griaule's and Dieterlen's writings have not always clearly distinguished explicit myths from the various commentaries intended to render the information coherent. But van Beek glibly asserts that *RP* is not a myth because the knowledge revealed therein is not based on a continuous text (p. 156), whereas Griaule and Dieterlen explicitly state (*RP*, p. 55, my translation, here and elsewhere), "There is no text of this myth in the Dogon language."

Is this body of knowledge reserved, as Griaule and Dieterlen assert, to a few "initiates"? This term is inappropriate, since the Dogon have no initiatory school, but there have been a few curious minds with lively enough imaginations to paint the amazing panorama that Griaule and Dieterlen rightly or wrongly attribute to "deep knowledge" (*RP*, p. 43). They let us glimpse their informants' active role in constructing Dogon "mythology." In their words (p. 51), one of the tasks of "initiates" is "to join [pieces] and produce a synthesis." This may seem strange to the ethnographer on a desperate quest for a myth's authentic, traditional version, fixed in a definite form once and for all, but is it not in the nature of mythical thought to propose ever new developments—even new variants—of a malleable tra-

1. Translated from the French by Noal Mellott.

ditional heritage? Van Beek's surprise at the contradictions between *DE* and *RP* can be set down to his rigid conception of myth. In my *Sacrifice in Africa* (1985:chap. 6) I suggested that *DE* is a "smith's" version of *RP*, and in the following chapter I showed that Bambara "mythology" can be considered a structural transformation of the Dogon's. Van Beek cares little for these processes, which are the best evidence of the authenticity of the various versions collected among these two peoples. He dismisses my book by saying that such a structural analysis "can . . . link any number of myths from any region" (n. 5); I challenge him to do so.

To turn the jurors against Griaule, isolated on the witness stand, van Beek observes that the profession has emphasized historical, political, and sociological variables. Time will tell whether the systematic neglect of the social sphere's symbolic dimension (emphasized by Marcel Mauss) is the future of anthropology. Such a declaration of faith has led the functionalist school to overlook completely the meaning of rites. Van Beek's Dogon ethnography hardly does much better (for example, when he blandly asserts that Dogon sacrifice follows "a pattern of invocation, immolation, and communal consumption . . . familiar from other parts of Africa" (p. 145). I will not venture to "deconstruct" this failure but will merely point out that the list of Dogon ethnographic accounts that he deems acceptable is pitiful. Can the so-called Griaule school really be accused of "granting symbolism and ideology a dominant place in cultural explanation" (p. 142)? Neither Griaule nor Dieterlen was looking for anthropological explanations of a general order; both were busy describing a classificatory system that encompasses "the last straw, down to the smallest animal; the spider, the worm, and the dragonfly enter into it just as does the lion" (*RP*, p. 40).

Griaule (1961) devoted a long article to the classification of insects, but van Beek attacks the way the names were collected. He claims that, on questioning, Griaule's informants confessed to him that they had invented imaginary categories because Griaule had obliged them to come up with names. Here classificatory thought, carried to its extreme, apparently overreached traditional taxonomy. During Griaule's fieldwork informants went so far as to distinguish between a "horse-dung beetle" and a "donkey-dung beetle" (Griaule 1961:22–23). Let us admit that the Dogon, poking fun at Griaule's insatiable curiosity, invented these new subcategories to make him happy; such a game would have been impossible in any society lacking a classificatory mania. Following their inclination, the Dogon decided to respond to Griaule, but from within their own system of thought and while introducing new terms into it. No more than myths do classificatory systems have definite forms once and for all. In any case, what are van Beek's grounds for finding these descriptions (which are too detailed for his taste) ridiculous?

Van Beek attempted to verify his predecessor's results. Since his findings were disappointing, he declares *DE* and *RP* inadmissible because the Dogon (at least those

he interviewed) do not recognize this depiction of themselves. He is right to say that Griaule erred in presenting Dogon symbolism as a fully integrated, seamless system, but is this a reason to dismiss his work?

Van Beek says that the major annual ceremony that takes place just before the rainy season is the Dogon's "main sacrificial event." As early as 1936 (when, according to van Beek, ethnography was good), Lifszyc and Paulme wrote that this ceremony is related to the cult of Lébé, an enormous snake that supposedly comes to lick the *hogon*, the supreme ritual figure of Dogon society. Later, Griaule and Dieterlen shed light on this character: Lébé is the first ancestor who was sacrificed and became the protector of agriculture. The snake, his reincarnation, has a double aspect: the "outer," associated with a village altar, watches over fields and crops, while the "inner" is the guardian of the *hogon's* altar (Dieterlen 1982:21). Thanks to Lébé, the *hogon* has power over rainfall. I have shown that this eminent official, whose status is unquestionably grounded in a myth (since he is Lébé's successor [Griaule and Dieterlen 1954:99]), is similar to a sacred king. This brings us to the core of African ecological strategies, where religious symbols are tied to rites that guarantee abundant harvests. Has van Beek really accounted for this system by saying that Lébé is the underworld counterpart of Amma, the supreme god (a statement that contradicts all the texts published to date, whether by Dieterlen, Griaule, or Calame-Griaule)?

DE describes the ancestor Lébé's sacrifice on earth and *RP*, in a complementary manner, the sacrifice in heaven of a creature called Nommo, later to become a water spirit. Van Beek sees Nommo, a central character in Dogon cosmology, merely as a transposition of Christ, hence as a very recent invention by Griaule's informants under the influence of the Protestant mission. The mission was set up in Dogon country in 1931, the year of Griaule's first field trip there, but van Beek is not surprised that such a syncretic system could have developed in so short a time. On the structural level, Nommo's sacrifice is just as much related to the Brahmanic model (wherein the universe is born out of a primordial victim) as to the Christian one. It thus stands at the intersection of these two, but this does not imply any historical relationship (de Heusch 1985:192–95). After all, this system of thought is perfectly African. Griaule's informants surely did not go to the Protestant pastor in Sanga to acquire the idea that the primordial sacrifice (preceded by castration) of the future water spirit was cosmic menstruation. Nor did they go there to get the idea that the victim was reborn as a pair of mixed twins. Of an extremely sophisticated description van Beek retains only surface features: the fact that Amma (God) stretched Nommo's arms out on a fork in the *kilena* tree (made from Nommo's umbilical cord) does not amount to a crucifixion, since "the sacrificer cut his neck and, at the same time, his pectoral fins" (*RP*, p. 285)—this fertility god, who dies and is resurrected following a Frazerian model, being a fish. Com-

paring the Nommo and Christian myths, I pointed out the radical difference between them (1985:196):

Nommo's blood is assuredly more powerful on the energy level than Christ's, since it floods a gestating universe and since the god's dismembered body becomes the very substance of the world. Contrary to Christian theology, African thought does not separate matter and spirit, seed and "souls." Nommo's sacrifice takes place in the sky, at the very instant of world creation; Christ's passion takes place on earth, at an intermediate time. Christ's sacrifice transforms the Old Testament alliance between men and God—as expressed through animal sacrifices and respect of interdictions—into a unique sacrificial mediation between heaven and earth.

Van Beek does not mention this analysis, undoubtedly because the structural approach, far from implying a historical relation between sets of terms, highlights both similarities and dissimilarities. Another similarity deemed important by van Beek is that Nommo, in agony like Christ, is thirsty. However, he vomits a water snake, which later becomes the "guardian of the seeds in water" (*RP*, p. 285). None of this can be understood without analyzing the term *yuguru* (snake). According to Griaule's and Dieterlen's informants, this word, composed of *yu* ("small" millet) and *guru* (husk), has an antonym *yurugu*, the name given to the fox (Nommo's fallen twin brother, who is said to have "stolen millet" [*RP*, p. 286]). None of this matters to van Beek, even though this gloss, like the story about Lébé, is directly related to his principal concern, ecology. It has nothing to do with a purported borrowing from Christianity.

I have not questioned Dieterlen's informants, but I did watch Dieterlen work with them while I was making a film (*Tracking the Pale Fox*) in 1984. I can bear witness to her extraordinary care in noting information, having it translated, and working on its exegesis. Of course, I do not know whether Griaule worked in the same way, but I have reason to think so. *DE* is, I agree, an enigmatic, problematic, troublesome book. Perhaps Griaule made a mistake when he had Ogotemméli's words translated in a literary style that often confused them with the comments of a white man who, while listening like a "disciple," sometimes did not accept this new role. I admit that it is not easy to make out what is to be attributed to each. The interpretation sometimes has an inappropriate metaphysical tone that Sgt. Kogem, who translated these interviews, could certainly not have introduced. I regret that a verbatim copy of this dialogue is not available, but tape recorders did not exist at that time. It is a pity that Griaule thought it necessary to compare his original data to the Mediterranean zodiac (*DE*, 32d day), but these risky comparisons, which cannot be attributed to Ogotemméli, were of no consequence thereafter.

Having formulated my reservations, I am not, however, convinced by van Beek's assertion that the Dogon classificatory system was invented by a few informants more or less influenced by Christianity and provoked by

Griaule's endless questioning. First, he has an especially simplistic idea of Dogon religion. Does he really believe that he has solved the problem of death by writing, "Masks may be viewed as elements of the bush introduced into the village" (p. 146)? And does his contention that Dogon masks represent contemporary society disprove Griaule's various interpretations of them? When we read all that has been written on this subject and when we watch Jean Rouch's films about it, we realize that mythical time and historical time combine in ceremonies to lead the souls of the deceased away during an extraordinary, polysemic theatrical production. It is not surprising that particular masks have been interpreted in various ways over the course of time. Griaule and Dieterlen have stated that this diversity comes from distinct "levels of knowledge." We may also suppose that there is no "official" version of a myth and that symbolic thought never stops reworking old material. The question remains whether this work has been done by the Dogon themselves or whether it represents a frenzy of interpretation by Griaule and a few special informants who agreed to retain a monopoly over this amazing creation. In my aforementioned film Rouch says that Griaule, whom he witnessed in the field, practiced the Socratic maieutic technique. But what serious ethnographer can claim never to have asked questions in the field? Berglund's (1975) admirable study of Zulu thought patterns and symbolism is nothing other than a tight set of questions and answers.

This is not how van Beek sees things. He concedes that the accused acted in good faith. Griaule did not lie, but he did unknowingly falsify the conditions of the fieldwork inquiry. Along with his informants, he proceeded to perform "bricolage" to build a system in which the Dogon—those questioned by van Beek—do not feel at home. Certain of Griaule's informants, summoned before the court, apparently even testified that Griaule "exaggerated." I demand, above all, that van Beek explain how a text as sophisticated as the *RP* could have been "the product of a bicultural interaction" (p. 152). The persons involved in this project, Griaule included, must have been geniuses, because what they have wrought together is wondrous, and I know few anthropologists capable of writing a novel with such verve and coherence.

There is no doubt that the few special informants who described, or put together out of traditional data, the Dogon's vast symbolic system were intellectuals. But why would a society with an oral culture not have intellectuals? The Mande peoples have long had contacts with the Muslim world. For a historian it would be more reasonable to examine whether "traditional" religions in Mali have been influenced by Islam (rather than Christianity, which, recently introduced, is poorly implanted there). For instance, I have pointed out (1985:168) that the flood theme in a version of Bambara cosmology may come from Islam. Likewise, might not the written signs used among the Bambara, Dogon, and Minanka be distantly related to Arab society's occult speculations? It is not surprising to discover, among the

Dogon, a divorce of an erudite interpretation of religion from a series of ordinary commentaries that make little effort to link the odds and ends of seemingly heterogeneous myths and rites. Nor is it much of a surprise that van Beek's study of this standard, common religion does not at all support Griaule's conviction that all of Dogon social life, including technology, is imbued with the sacred. How could it be otherwise, since the mythical construction effected by a number of "Ph.D.'s"—who are no less worthy than the theologians of other religions—is obviously not shared by all? There is no religious hierarchy or school of theology among the Dogon. This is not the moment to discuss the deep, characteristic differences that would crop up in a study conducted by an African ethnographer (who knew very little about Christianity) were he to do fieldwork first among the clergy and then among various categories of the faithful.

Informants are not equally qualified to talk about every aspect of social life, and certainly not in matters of magic and religion, which are always more or less the business of specialists. Griaule and Dieterlen have suggested that speculation about myths is open to everyone among the Dogon. Since the intellectual elite participating in this learned endeavour has no political power, we can conclude that myths are not the keystone of Dogon social structure as Griaule and Dieterlen sometimes imprudently implied. But is this a reason for rejecting these *paroles étonnantes*, which hold ever more surprises and unsettle our established ideas about African thought? After all, this is the voice of a certain number of Dogon whom van Beek simply did not have the chance to meet. By refusing to hear the testimony of Griaule's informants, van Beek has robbed the African imagination of its creativity.

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On Zigzag Designs: Three Levels of Meaning

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Taking a most interesting approach to San rock art and Upper Paleolithic art, Lewis-Williams and Dowson (CA 29:201–17) explain certain depictions of purely geometric motifs and complex figural scenes in terms of visualizations experienced in altered states of consciousness. They support their argument with the information that shamans, who practised trance, were often the producers of such depictions. Accounts of trance experiences and observations of what happens physiologically to people during trance are used to interpret some of the content of San rock art. In particular, geometric forms including the zigzag, the lattice, sets of parallel lines, dots and flecks, nested catenary curves, and thin meandering lines or filigrees are interpreted as entoptic phenomena, visual sensations derived from the structure of the optic system. This comment focuses on one simple geometric form, the zigzag motif, which, as a component of these entoptic phenomena, appears mainly in the initial stage of trance. The zigzag motif, as described by Lewis-Williams and Dowson (see also 1989) and Dowson and Holliday (1989), often occurs in San rock art as a single sign or as a complement to figural scenes.

Recent studies on the ethological aspects of linear patterns (Uher 1991) suggest that there may be another reason for the frequent occurrence of this sign not only in San rock art but also in the visual arts and in material culture in general. "Artificial" signs as a form of non-verbal communication and an expression of aesthetic behavior are of great interest in human ethology. Simple linear patterns such as the zigzag indicate the beginning of environmental marking. The incised motif on the Bacho Kiro piece, dated to the Mousterian period (Marshack 1976), is but one early example. Motor ability and the attractiveness of linear forms that is a consequence of the structure of the mechanisms of visual perception (Jung 1971, Rathmayer 1976) are certainly not the only explanations for the frequency with which the zigzag is found. Cross-cultural observations show significant patterns of preference and regularities in its use that suggest a possible biological basis.

To begin with, the zigzag pattern is frequently combined with various eye motifs, particularly in objects that function in ideological spheres of life. The eyes play an important role in human non-verbal communication. The stimulus "eyes" elicits certain innate behavioral responses (e.g., Hess and Polt 1960; Hess 1965; Vine 1970; Coss 1970, 1972; Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989). One example is the spontaneous avoidance response to the staring eye (e.g., Ellsworth, Carlsmith, and Henson 1972). Eye motifs are universally used in such objects as amulets and