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REFERENCES

APTER, Andrew. – *Beyond Words. Discourse and Critical Agency in Africa*. Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, 2007, 192 p.

- 1 This book consists of a collection of essays published from 1983 to 2005 in various academic journals by Andrew Apter, professor of anthropology and history at the University of California, Los Angeles. Both the preface and the introduction set the tone of the demarche adopted in the book. Following a reflexive approach to his own work and intellectual route, the author presents the two interlinked major issues which have informed his long-standing anthropological interest, namely ritual-language genres and the critical theory of discourse about Africa. Indeed, if Apter has extensively worked on Yoruba *orisha* worship¹, his approach of religious beliefs and practices does not resort to the classical rhetorics of tribalism and tradition which were used to invent “Africa” and are still entrenched in postcolonial discourses. On the contrary, his work highlights how rituals, and in the first place language within rituals, constitute an indigenous form of critical practice. In other words, rituals are studied as a set of discursive interactions through which sociopolitical relations are reproduced and transformed by Africans themselves. Rituality therefore displays modalities of “discursive agency” whereby actors have the linguistic capacity to act effectively for the transformation of a structure or a situation.
- 2 One of the first interests of the book, well asserted in all essays gathered here, lies in the reflexive approach it proposes. After briefly retracing in the preface how his interest in sociolinguistics and pragmatics was encouraged by the different professors who trained him in social anthropology, and later fostered by some of his colleagues indulged in linguistic anthropology around the questions of performativity and indexicality (Silverstein, Hanks, Duranti), Apter interestingly dwells on the academic readings which deeply contributed to making him readjust or even revise his positions

over the years. Thus, in relation to Yoruba rituals, he shows how J. L. Comaroff's, K. Barer's and H. L. Gates's works² constitute milestones in the maturation of his own reflections on ritual *orisha* language as a form of power and agency. He also stresses the impact of V. Y. Mudimbe's publication³ about the production of Africa as a set of representations, showing how this deconstructive project was a challenge that scholars had to confront in order to continue producing ideas and writings on Africa. This was particularly the case for Apter as his "focus on secrecy and deep-knowledge claims was buried so deeply in the colonial library" (p. xi). This transparency and intellectual honesty in exploring his intellectual heritage, and in emphasizing the significant role of academic emulation, are to put to Apter's credit. The introduction develops the means and tools which were selected by Apter to write about Africa without resorting to or reinventing mystifications about Africa or, as he puts it, to write about "an Africa beyond words and images" (p. 1). After illuminating the manifold modalities of "agency" (discursive or sociopolitical, directly oppositional or more quotidian in the form of intentions and micropactices), Apter shows how agency, as a form of power, is always "reversionary and revolutionary" (p. 7), opposing authority as an official and legitimate sociopolitical order. Identifying spaces of critical agency in Africa and accounting for its powerful capacity to reshape authority and power relations would therefore constitute the first task of any anthropological research.

- 3 The essays presented here, whether based on information and findings from the works of other scholars or deriving from Apter's fieldwork in Nigeria, are aimed at illustrating more specifically the relevance of an analysis of discursive agency. Focusing on ritual languages and oratory genres, the author proposes a variety of reflections which explore their pragmatic dimensions and assert their critical functions. The first chapter entitled "*Que faire ?*" ("What to do?") echoes the preface and the introduction as it confronts once again the challenges posed by Mudimbe (1988) and Hountondji⁴ (1983) in regards to discourses about Africa, but focuses specifically on the question of the conditions of possibility of an African philosophy. Apter first presents Mudimbe's and Hountondji's positions, underlying their common standpoint that ethnophilosophies constitute a Western ideological construction, but insisting that the two authors differ on the question of what is African philosophy: according to Mudimbe, there is no African philosophy as such but only African forms of wisdoms and knowledge which can not be expressed with classical Western philosophical concepts, whereas Hountondji considers African philosophy as a Western philosophy practised by Africans. Apter seeks to find a middle ground between these two different positions. Arguing that Yoruba deep knowledge constitutes a space of critical strategies—where words can be used to challenge the official authority, he claims that African secret language/wisdom which are engaged in rituals do not constitute an ethnophilosophy as such. However, this language/wisdom needs to be considered an ethnopracticals whose critical function, although pragmatic and not theoretical, compares with that of philosophy. To the question of "What to do?", one shall therefore answer: take seriously the critical dimension of secret rituals and wisdom by accounting for their powerful oppositional dimension, so that past representations of Africa give way to the study of actual practices of negotiation and contestation.
- 4 Except for the last chapter, which concludes the book in reflecting again on the opening theme of the challenge posed by Africanist discourses, the four following chapters consist of re-readings of classical publications on African rituals in the light of the concept of "discursive agency". All chapters follow a similar pattern: after

presenting the main arguments of the classical work(s) under discussion, Apter highlights their strength and their main flaws in grasping the potential or actual modalities of agency which lies at the core of ritual languages. He then proceeds to re-analyze data provided by these authors by setting specific language uses in their historical context and local situation. Thus, in Chapter 2, Apter opposes approaches which regard Southern Bantu praise oral genres as a form of literature disconnected from its context of enunciation. Drawing on Comaroff's work (1975) among the Tswana people of South Africa, and more specifically on the notion of "indigenous model of incumbency"⁵, Apter proposes new insights in praise-poems and praise-songs in three different societies (Tswana, Xhosa and Zulu) which show that these oratory genres incorporate a critical component. Indeed, as praises are always combined with the evaluation of the actual behaviours of the big men/kings who are praised, they consequently display poets' and reciters' capacity for agency. The third chapter, entitled "Rituals against Rebellion", revisits classical debates on the question of rituals of rebellion in reference to the practice of "joking relationships". Departing from Gluckman's famous work⁶ about the Ncwala ritual of rebellion in North Rhodesia, on the grounds that it presupposes a link between political acts of rebellion and the transformative power of language which is not demonstrated, and from Beidelman's symbolical insight⁷ on the same rituals, which does not render justice to the political and situational context, Apter equates rituals with "joking relationships" using Radcliffe-Brown's elaborate conceptions on this topic⁸. This comparison allows him to assert the idea that rebellious songs and words expressed within those rituals are similar to mockery and jesting characterizing joking relationships: they work towards the maintaining of the authority, therefore constituting "rituals *against* rebellion". In Chapter 4, Apter comes to his own Yoruba materials collected over the years in respect to the issue of what has long been called "ritualized license" or "permitted disrespect" in classical anthropology. Exploring songs and words performed during the Oroyeye festival of Ayede-Ekiti (northeastern Yorubaland), he shows that the main actors of the festival, female elders who are respected and feared for their secret knowledge, can display historical memories and dynastic events which challenge the authority of the incumbent king and can even have the actual effect of deposing kings. This chapter brightly relocates texts and songs collected in the field in their historical and performative contexts to better highlight their powerful and critical dimensions. As far as Chapter 5 is concerned, it follows the same re-reading and critical pattern adopted in the first two demonstrative chapters of the book (chapter 2 and 3) in tackling Griaule's work on the deep knowledge and cosmology of the Dogon⁹. With the plan to "recast Griaule's exegetical project in more socially dynamic terms" (p. 98), Apter operates a comparative analysis based on his own fieldwork among the Yoruba to show how esoteric knowledge (what Griaule named "*la parole claire*") is in fact indeterminate and fluid¹⁰. Based on Leiris' study¹¹ on the pragmatic dimension of Dogon rituals, the author then turns to words and discourses collected at the time of the Dogon *sigi* festival to operate a linguistic and pragmatic analysis of verbs, pronouns and locatives used at that time. Still following Leiris, this analysis allows Apter to demonstrate that, in the *sigi* festival, language does not directly refer to any mythic knowledge, but contributes to relocating and orienting the human body in social space.

- 5 These four core essays answer the question "*Que faire?*" referred to in the first chapter, illustrating Apter's theoretical approach to language as a form of power to transform social, political and symbolical reality. In this exercise of re-readings of great classical

authors and ethnographic materials, the author does not content with approximations or evasive comments, but skilfully demonstrates his in-depth understanding of very specific anthropological themes and his extended knowledge of subsequent critical works. However, beyond the fact that the whole exercise turns out a bit repetitive, as each chapter is built on a same general pattern (presentation of classical texts and themes discussed, unveiling of main flaws, re-reading of the material following the pragmatic lenses to ritual languages so as to acknowledge for agency) and therefore starts anew what the previous chapter has already demonstrated, a certain number of theoretical questions arise. Advocating for a pragmatic stand, whereby language needs to be replaced into its specific context of production, Apter sometimes happens to resort to a hermeneutical approach of texts. Although he acknowledges this fact for Chapter 2 (“I paid very little attention to the speech act of praise-singing itself”, p. 48), yet he does not elaborate on the conditions of compatibility of the two approaches usually presented as opposed¹². The second point to stress is concerned with the limits Apter puts to his own rereading and critical demarche. Thus, instead of being evaluated, Comaroff’s incumbency model is taken for granted, as well as Radcliffe-Brown’s elaborations on joking relationships. But the grounds for the comparison between rituals of rebellion and joking relationships, upon which Apter builds his new insights on the functioning of rituals in the third chapter, would appear extremely shaky if the functionalist bias which presided at the construction of the anthropological category of joking relationships had been demonstrated¹³. Our last comment has to do with the general issue of verbal agency, evoked in Chapter 2 (p. 43) but not answered: how can it be explained that praises which are directly addressed to the king so often incorporate critical components, even in monarchic/despotic political systems where authority has reached such a high level of organization and control over the society that it possesses the means to challenges all possibilities of resistance ?

- 6 Chapter 6, which constitutes the conclusion of the book, returns to Apter’s central concern about reinventing an anthropological discipline for a postcolonial Africa beyond the colonial library and anthropological reason. Against Mafeje’s radical view announcing the death of anthropology¹⁴, Apter asserts that the selection of certain objects of research (*e.g.*, the dialogic construction of reality, the historical and present-day co-production of Africa between Africans and non-Africans, the multiple spheres of resistance to domination) and the adoption of paradigmatic positions which not only acknowledge the agency of individuals, but also purport to give insights on the different ways and means used by agents to transform a situation or a structure, enable researchers to go beyond collective and historical reifications which have for too long been associated with Africa. In other words, now that the manifold logics underlying Africanist discourses have been revealed, there is room for revised and alternate voices. Against pessimistic assertions that a science of the other is condemned, Apter advocates for the refocusing of anthropology following a pragmatic-based and historically-conscious approach.

NOTES

1. Among various writings, see his book *Black Critics and Kings: the Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1992.
2. L. Comaroff, "Talking Politics: Oratory and Authority in Tswana Chieftdom", in M. Bloch (ed.), *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society* (London: Academic Press), 1975: 141-161; K. Barber, "Yoruba Oríkì and Deconstructive Criticism", *Research in African Literature* 13 (4), 1984: 497-518; H. L. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1988.
3. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1988.
4. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1983.
5. Comaroff's concept of "indigenous model of incumbency" refers to existing standards of exemplary conducts attached to high office, to which the incumbent is expected to conform and against which is performance is evaluated (Apter, p. 33).
6. Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion in South-east Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1954. In this chapter, the discussion is more specifically concerned with a form of ritual called. The Ncwala is a national ceremony held once a year in which praises are addressed to the king. But this event also comprises sacred *simemo* songs, which appear to insult the king. These songs constitute the "rebellious" part of the ritual as discussed by Gluckman, Beidelman (1966) and Apter here.
7. O. Beidelman, "Swazi Royal Rituals", *Africa* 36, 1966: 373-405.
8. A. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structures and Functions in Primitive Society* (Glencoe: Free Press), 1952.
9. M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau. Entretiens avec Ogotemmêli* (Paris: Livre de Poche), 1966 [1948]; M. Griaule & G. Dieterlen, *Le renard pâle* (Paris : Institut d'Ethnologie), 1991 [1965].
10. Apter refers to van Beek's essay or "field evaluation of Griaule's ethnography", (W. van Beek, "Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule", *Current Anthropology* 32 (2), 1991: 139-167), which demonstrates that "Dogon cosmology" textualized by Griaule results from a dialogic construction between Griaule and his informants. Moreover, according to van Beek, the Dogon today would not recognize the cosmology "invented" by Griaule.
11. M. Leiris, *La langue secrète des Dogon de Sanga* (Paris : Éditions Jean Michel-Place), 1992.
12. J. Bazin, "Interpréter ou décrire", in J. Revel & N. Wachtel (dir.), *Une école pour les sciences sociales. De la V^e section à l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (Paris : Éditions du Cerf-Éditions de l'EHESS), 1996 : 401-420.
13. See for example M.-A. Fouéré, "Les métamorphoses des relations à plaisanteries. Étude d'un concept ethnologique devenu un enjeu politique dans la construction des États-nations", *Cahiers d'Études africaines* XLV (2), 178, 2005 : 389-430.
14. A. Mafeje, "Anthropology and Independent Africans: Suicide or End of an Era?", *African Sociological Review* 2 (1), 1998: 1-43.