

Culture



Luc de HEUSCH, *The Drunken King, or, the Origin of the State* (R. Willis, trans.), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982. 288 pages, US \$27.50 (cloth). Originally published in French by Editions Gallimard in 1972

Jim Freedman

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[See table of contents](#)

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The sixth chapter, "Marriage, Legitimacy, Alliance", presents an interesting examination of the notions of marriage and legitimacy using six detailed examples. Two of these (on the Kachin and the Sinhalese) are quite extensive and present some useful and perhaps new insights on the two areas. In the very short seventh chapter, "Some Aspects of Cosmology", Leach adds a bit more on the Kachin but leaves the impression that it is the seventh day and not the seventh chapter and thus he should rest.

As a whole the book is loosely organized, often marred by aphoristic digressions that appear to be attempts to score points to the detriment of foes, real and imagined. With the exception of the chapter on marriage the book is also notable for its lack of sustained argument. I only fear that this review suggests that there might be more coherence than there in fact is. These petty complaints aside, the book might make an excellent discussion piece for advanced students. Or perhaps it could provide a several years' supply of unkind remarks applicable to one's more irritating colleagues.

Luc de HEUSCH, *The Drunken King, or, the Origin of the State* (R. Willis, trans.), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982. 288 pages, US \$27.50 (cloth). Originally published in French by Editions Gallimard in 1972.

By Jim Freedman
University of Western Ontario

Let me pose my main query right off. To what extent does de Heusch's wizard-like intellect overlap with the African intellect? The question inevitably comes up. Here are two intellects in dialogue with one another. The African locution of allusions and symbolic reference exploring the costs and benefits of kingly rule... and de Heusch's synthesis of high wire proportions, taking this world of myths, rituals, incantations and adages to demonstrate the semantic unity of the broad area of central African kingdoms. De Heusch has taken these references and images and for the sake of the exercise collapsed them into categories of which all cultures in the area partake in expressing themselves. These categories constitute a framework erected out of abstractions from experience, abstractions such as texture, sound, sensations, continuity and directions. This framework is the 'tour de force intellectuel' of this book. The question is whether these categories which are explicit in the analysis are at least implicit in the mythology.

And my answer, right off, surprises even me in its affirmative response of yes. The argument is quite convincing. De Heusch's wizardry is indeed an accurate reflection of the wizardry of African political reflections. The reflections are subtle. Anyone who knows African traditional politics, the profound concern with power, its exercise and its control, would be inclined to believe that the complexity of reflections which de Heusch demonstrates is indeed authentic.

I was fortunate to experience the original expositions, in 1968, of the analyses which make up this book. He delivered pieces of the first four chapters in this book as part of a course at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. I had already read one of his earlier works, *Le Rwanda et la civilisation interlacustre* and had felt that this book was like nothing I had ever read before. My fascination with his facile and creative style drew me in his train, and I too began to study African mythology and history in the interlacustrine area. The Belgian reputation as colonial administrators in poor; but the Heusch, and his peer, Jan Vansina, who is Belgian also and an ethnologist/historian of considerable repute for the Zaire/Interlacustrine area, have gone some way to make up for their country's colonial performance. Their contributions to this area's history and culture is enormous. Working within their footsteps have been a pleasure.

In 1972, six years after the appearance of Vansina's *Kingdoms of the Savannah* (a study of the history of the central Congolese Kingdoms), de Heusch published this study of the kingdoms' mythologies, *Le roi ivre ou l'origine de l'État*, Volume 1. Following its publication a decade ago, it was hailed as the Africanist's answer to *The Raw and the Cooked*, and de Heusch was hailed as Africa's Levi-Strauss. In his review in *Africa* (October, 1973) Vansina praised de Heusch for providing an impressive interpretation of the Kuba mythology via his structural extrapolations, even making sense of data to which de Heusch had never had access. Mary Douglas reviewed it for *Man* (September, 1973) and praised the book for finally allowing "Africanists to judge for themselves in their chosen field of competence, the value of structural analysis". The book became a landmark in mythological analysis, and remains so. Mary Douglas closed her review with the hope that the volume be translated so as "to be more accessible to the Anglophone Africans who are increasingly concerned to understand the origins of their culture." Now, in 1982, we have the translation.

One value of the book is that it makes the enterprise of structural analysis much more trans-

parent to the disinclined. It is a charming, readable and engagingly poetic rendering of Congolese myths. The translator, Roy Willis, has clarified phrases and terminology with appropriate notes. The translation looks good, though who knows the trials that authors and their translators have to endure. It makes Levi-Strauss (not to mention de Heusch), not only knowable, but also do-able, for it avoids many of the enigmatic turns of logic which makes the Amerindian studies hard to follow. The transformations from one mytho-semantic area to another are more credible and much less abstract. And finally, the subject matter is of engaging interest. The problem for which these mythologies and cultural expressions are a medium is the problem of creating an African monarchy with aristocratic manners out of a plebian, coarse and segmented socio-economy. The question the Luba, Kuba and Lunda kingdoms are asking, and de Heusch is analysing, is how to think about the transition from the diffusion to the centralization of power. What legitimizes coercive authority?

This is a familiar problem in Western democracies where the terms of debate are constituencies, freedoms and the allocations and checks of power. The terms of debate for these African polities include cultural proprieties and natural forces, and the form of debate exhibits itself more in the form of a concerned mythology than a written editorial. This debate for the Congolese kingdoms opens, in de Heusch's book, with one of the more socio-political of the mytho-commentaries, the story of the confrontation of two rulers : an ancient, prehistoric one and an historic one. The first one is pre-monarchical (Nkongolo), he is grotesque in his incestuous behaviour and eating habits. The second, a visitor (Mbidi, whose symbolism is extended and elaborated by his son Kalala), has more refined manners and practices exogamy. The characterization of the two figures involves a panorama of cultural and political metaphors. De Heusch explores the difference of manners. The one eats and laughs indiscriminately, the other surrounds eating and utterings with rules of decorum. The one lives in a world which is moist and full of holes, the other lives in a less soft, closed, wrapped-up and oriented universe. We find these themes of textures and sounds, sensations and manners throughout the entire area, and the meaning they acquire in the first analysis lends meaning to the context of their numerous other appearances.

The transition from an acephalous to a centralized conception of authority looks good so far. But the same figures, Nkongolo, Mbidi and Kalala appear in other myths which show the transition more for what it really is. Nkongolo, the old original

potentate is shown to be a drunken, excessive and noisy sort, but his reign is without death, without the alternation of the seasons ; it is marked by a continuity where the alternation of favour and disfavour, fortune and misfortune are not so dramatic. The new kings are rain makers, and they bring order where disorder seems to have prevailed. (Disorder here means lack of significant distinctions, i.e. lack of continuity.) With order comes warfare and the alternation of seasons. With the new order comes the failure of the attempt to build a tower to the heavens to have a link between earth and sky. The tower crumbles, and people are killed. They are deprived of immortality. With order comes an irreversible set of distinctions. The Luba myths involving towers-of-babel stories, the separation of earth and water, the bringing of the rain and with it, alternation with the dry season... these show artfully the dubious accomplishment of the institution of the state.

The Kuba version of the transition is even less enthusiastic about statehood. It involves a patricide, the disjunction of father and son and general antagonism between relatives, an unattractive theme and one which is articulated in an initiation ceremony in which sons themselves are ritually killed. As new versions and new semantic areas are brought into consideration, as the universe of discourse enlarges, the exercise becomes more difficult and the masterful strokes of de Heusch become the more impressive. A real collage is established, unitary in its malaise regarding the prospects of a legitimate political rule.

Furthermore, if the reader is patient, more than just the collage begins to take shape. An African 'ethnologique' begins to take shape, involving resemblances, deductions, terms of discourse and permissible forms of argument. It is this, in the end, which de Heusch desires to reveal. We hear of this aim on page 34 and 35, in which he takes Tempels to task for his fallacious attempt at a Bantu philosophy and declares Turner's meticulous analysis of ritual as a guiding light for his work. De Heusch may one day lay his finger quite accurately on the terms and relations of such a logic. He has just published a second volume "mythes et rites bantous" decoding the structure of Rwandan and interlacustrine mythology. There is no doubt more to come.