

Reflections on Ethnography

Discovery: From Informative to Performative Ethnography

On the evening of June 17, 1986, in the midst of a relatively short stint of field work in Lubumbashi, the capital of the mining region of Shaba in Zaire, I was writing up the day's events when I made a discovery. At least that is how it appeared to me then. In the year before, while pursuing investigations not directly related to the topic of this study, I had come upon a statement that was clearly not formulated *ad hoc* and was pronounced with the authority of an axiom: *Le pouvoir se mange entier*, Power is eaten whole. The circumstances in which it was quoted to me (about which more in chapter 2) were such that I was unable to class it away as an interesting proverb. The more I thought about it, and discussed it with others, the more intriguing it became.

In the afternoon of that day in 1986 I had brought it up when I met with a group of popular actors whom I had known since the seventies. I did this with no particular purpose in mind and I was overwhelmed by their eagerness to explain "le pouvoir se mange entier" to me and to themselves. Spontaneously they decided that it would be just the right topic for their next play. On the spot they began planning—first suggestions for a plot were made, problems of translating the French term *pouvoir* were debated, several actors cited sayings and customs from their home country—in short, I had triggered an ethnographic brainstorm (all this will be reported on in more detail in chapter 3).

In the evening when I assembled my scribbled notes and reminders into a coherent account, I realized how much I had learned from this session. As I said, I was overwhelmed by the reaction to my casual inquiry; I was also extremely tired after many similar fourteen-hour days. It was difficult enough to keep up with my other projects; and here I was, faced with a wealth of information I had not really asked for. This is how the day's entry in the journal ended:

... but I simply cannot take in anymore information. Whatever else happened [on that afternoon], here is a "new ethnography"—the ethnographer's interpretive idea [to use the dictum as a key to cultural conceptions of power] is taken up, collectively discussed, cast into a play, tested on a public, etc., all this [starting] from a chicken gizzard in Kolwezi.¹

In the days that followed I kept thinking about the implications of my discovery. As is often the case, ideas that strike us as new when we first formulate them begin to look less new as soon as we have had time to reflect and remember. Sometimes we must reluctantly admit that our excitement was hardly justified. In this case, I knew it was different. New or not new, I decided to spell out what I had called a "new ethnography."

To put the thoughts that follow in context I need to back up briefly. I learned some time ago that in the kind of projects I was involved with—studying a religious movement among mine workers, later expanding my investigations to language and work and to artistic expression—received methods and prescriptions for empirical research simply do not work. The phenomena I was interested in offered very little in the way of outwardly observable behavior, of traits that could be mapped or counted, in short, of the kind of "hard data" that, properly collected, classified, and analyzed, are said to produce ethnographic knowledge. Probably, working with an elusive religious movement that refused to be approached in any other way but talk, in and on their own terms, was decisive in shaping my convictions. Negatively, I first formulated my position as a critique of positivism and scientism in anthropology. Positively, I found many useful insights in the "ethnography of speaking" propagated by Dell Hymes and others, although I began to see that it too had its limitations.² Be that as it may, I came away from my reflections convinced that ethnography is essentially, not incidentally, communicative or dialogical; conversation, not observation, should be the key to conceptualizing ethnographic knowledge production. Later I tried to deepen this idea by exploring what seemed to me a paradox, or even a contradiction, in the practice of anthropology: Although we do our field research on the premise of coevalness, of sharing time with our interlocutors on equal terms, we then go on to produce an allochronic dis-

course based on temporal distancing; we construct an Other whom we relegate to times other than our own.³

When I returned to Shaba in 1985 and 1986, for the first time in more than ten years, I started out with the communicative and critical approach to ethnography which I had cultivated in the meantime. That I did not become complacent about it is due to the "discovery" I am reporting here. But first back to the journal. On June 19 (that is, three days after the first entry and after another meeting with the theater group and some intensive work with a religious community) I wrote:

Throughout all this I continue to invent a new "method" (about which nothing is new but the formulation, pulling together established insights). It will be a step beyond "communicative" and "dialogical" ethnography. I am thinking of a theoretical article with the title: "From informative to performative ethnography."

In what sense could and should one go beyond communicative and dialogical ethnography? That communication is no panacea for our research problems I had realized some time ago; it can in fact become a dangerous concept if merely to assert it is believed to guarantee "power-free" interaction on equal terms. When they are used to describe the nature of ethnographic research, communication and dialogue are above all epistemological concepts (they point to intersubjectivity and the constitutive role of language in formulating and sharing knowledge). But very often communication and dialogue are invoked in ethical arguments calling for freedom from constraints and domination and for encounter on equal terms. As I see it, these criteria are epistemological first (naming conditions that enable us to know) and only secondarily ethical (prescribing attitudes to be adopted by ethnographers toward their interlocutors). Moreover, if "epistemological" is to cover not only (and even not so much) rules of verification but ways of accounting for the production of knowledge, we must get beyond using communication and dialogue as cover-all protestations of good will and spell out in as much detail as we are capable of what actually happens when we communicate and engage in dialogue.

As far as I can oversee the current state of efforts in that direction there are two ways in which this is being done with some success. There is, first, the "ethnography of speaking" (and its theoretical cousin, ethnology), which strives for more sophisticated and specific accounts of what is involved in (mostly verbal) communication. More

1. The "chicken gizzard in Kolwezi" is a reminder of the occasion on which the saying about power was quoted to me for the first time. That story is in and of itself important and will be told in chapter 2.

2. See Fabian 1971b, 1979a.

3. See Fabian 1983.

recently, there is a tendency to explore the fact that ethnography not only entails communication with members of other cultures but also communication of our findings, mostly through writing. The former grew out of a critical confrontation with linguistics, the latter profited from a reception of theories in the field of literary criticism; both draw to varying degrees on semiotics, i.e., the science that specializes in decoding the symbols that serve to represent cultural knowledge.⁴

But there is a third direction in which to probe and this brings us back, finally, to what I called a 'discovery'. Put in very simple terms, it is this: No matter how far away I got from a positivistic conception of research, no matter how communicative my approach had become, I still acted as an investigator. As long as one participant asks questions and the other is expected to respond with information (irrespective of how much grammatical or rhetorical questioning occurs in their dialogue) the situation will remain asymmetrical, to say the least. Now, a solution, or just a step further, may be to examine the one concept that often remains outside the debates on anthropological knowledge: information.

It seems to be a truism bordering on the trivial that an ethnographer is out to collect information and that he can get it from those who have it. But who 'has' information? Members of all societies have, of course, certain kinds of knowledge and skills which they can convey directly or indirectly. An informant may be able to tell me his birth date, the names of his paternal aunts, describe how to get to the next village, and so forth. But what if he or she is asked how magic works, what sacrifices are good for, or—why not?—what the saying 'le pouvoir se mange entier' means?

It is only fair to say that anthropologists have been aware of these differences; they have thought about reference versus connotation, instrumental versus expressive behavior, material versus symbolic aspects of society and culture. They have been ingenious in extracting 'hard' information on social structure or ecological adaptations from myths, rituals, music, masks, and other 'representations' of culture. What has not been given sufficient consideration is that about large areas and important aspects of culture no one, not even the native, has information that can simply be called up and expressed in discursive statements. This sort of knowledge can be represented—made present—only through action, enactment, or performance. In fact, once one sees matters in this light, the answers we get to our ethnographic questions

can be interpreted as so many cultural performances. Cultural knowledge is always mediated by 'acting'.

Performances, on the other hand, although they can be asked for, are not really responses to questions. The ethnographer's role, then, is no longer that of a questioner, he or she is but a provider of occasions, a catalyst in the weakest sense, and a producer (in analogy to a theatrical producer) in the strongest. Victor Turner, pursuing a similar line of thought, has called the ethnographer an 'ethnodramaturg'.⁵

What is the significance of such a discovery? Does it bring some thing to light, or some way? Does it qualify as a new level of knowledge, or should it just be added as a new method to the arsenal that already exists? Answers to these questions require that we briefly look at uses (and abuses) of performance in social-scientific theorizing.

Performance: Some Uses in and around Anthropology

From a point of view above the many involved debates about performance—a vantage point which is hard to obtain and harder to maintain—it seems to me that the concept has served its users contrary purposes.

For those theorists who seek structural, logical, or quasi-mathematical, and ultimately neural, foundations for a science of man (or, at any rate, for a science of one aspect of human activity which is then hoped to become a key to others), 'performance' refers to actual, physically palpable, doing, talking, moving, in short, to that which (often in a pejorative tone) is declared 'empirical' behavior. 'Competence' usually figures as the obligatory counterconcept to this notion of performance. The most influential contemporary proponent of this disdainful view of performance is Noam Chomsky. To be fair to him, it should be said that he would be the first to disclaim applicability of his views beyond that domain of the human mind he defines as language. Still, he has been able to create a climate in which other, less rigorous theorists seem to thrive because he can be seen as the current prophet of an age-old dream: to cut through appearances and reveal essences; to demonstrate timeless order beneath contingent confusion; above all, to attain 'deeper', irrefutable, hence more powerful knowledge.

At about the same time when performance entered the vocabulary of the grammarians (in the 1950s) it came to prominence in the writings of folklorists (see Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975 for relevant literature). Here it was opposed to 'text' and its significance was positive: to stress

4. For the 'ethnography of speaking' see the collected essays by its pioneer, Dell Hymes 1974; on 'poetics and politics of ethnography,' see Clifford and Marcus 1986.

5. In this essay in Ruby 1982: 96.

the integrity of actual events of reciting myths, epics, and stories. Attention to performance made it necessary to study such events through participation, and through a full appreciation of their contexts (including the distribution of roles among participants, the uses of time and space in music and dance linked to oral performances). This was proposed against a praxis of 'text-collection' followed by postmortem classification and analysis. To the extent that more attention was paid to pragmatic and rhetorical aspects of language this was certainly a turn toward a more empirical approach, although it is hard to discover in it any resemblance with the caricature of linguistic empiricism that seems to provide comfort to generativist linguists.

From the point of view of anthropology, one line of thinking about performance found its most fruitful formulation, up to now, when critique of generativist formalism, the new orientation toward oral 'texts' (and a few other concerns that need not be specifically mentioned at this point), converged in the 'ethnography of speaking.' Who speaks to whom, when, where, how, and why—these questions were (once again) proclaimed crucial in understanding language as a 'system in action.'

As might be expected, this established on the whole a positive notion of performance as a source of ethnographic knowledge. It was paralleled, or followed, by similar theoretical developments in ethnomusicology and visual anthropology. Now it orients inquiry even where Dell Hymes's work has not been directly influential. A recent example demonstrating the influence of this idea is Jan Vansina's thorough revision of his earlier classic on oral tradition. Attention to performance becomes the criterion that distinguishes the oral historian from his colleague who works with written documents:

[The oral historian] did not find the piece of writing, but rather created it. He or she recorded a living tradition. The questions now are: what is the relationship of the text to a particular performance of the tradition involved and what is the relationship of that performance to the tradition as a whole? Only when it is clear how the text stands to the performance and the latter to the tradition can an analysis of the contents of the message begin. This means that the questions of authenticity, originality, authorship, and place and time of composition must be asked at each of these stages. The crucial link is the performance. Only the performance makes the tradi-

6. See for instance Hymes's essay and other contributions in Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975 and the programmatic article, with supplementary essays, by R. Bauman (1977, reissued in 1984).

tion perceptible and at the same time only a performance is the source of the ensuing text (1985: 33f., my emphasis).⁷

Perhaps the most important insight to be derived from an 'ethnography of speaking' approach is this: Text and performance are aspects of a process; they may relate to each other as phases (when production is considered) or as layers that can be discerned (when communicative events are analyzed), but they do not relate as tokens or representations to events. A text is not a representation, much less a symbol or icon, of a communicative event. It is that event in its textual realization. A performance does not 'express' something in need of being brought to the surface, or to the outside; nor does it simply enact a preexisting text. Performance is the text in the moment of its actualization (in a story told, in a conversation carried on, but also in a book read). That performances can be staged, that they can be good or bad, that they can be genuine or faked, or simply go wrong, that some people are better performers than others—all this points to dialectical, processual relationships between texts and performances.⁸ It reveals as misguided any sort of textual fundamentalism, which is a temptation especially for those anthropologists whom the idea to study culture as text(s) has liberated from positivism and naïve realism.

It would be comforting to be able to say that what we have sketched so far more or less covers the uses of performance in anthropology; as it is, the story is complicated enough. But we must take another step and this is perhaps again best done by contrasting two tendencies.

First there are the views of performance in anthropology character-

7. See also Jawsiewicki and Newbury 1986 for other examples for the turn to performance in recent African historiography.

8. The notion of performance I try to develop here differs from the one proposed by Bauman (1984: 2-58) even though I believe that convergences between our approaches are in the end more important. Bauman begins with a problem that is not mine in this study: to distinguish what he calls 'verbal art' from other kinds of verbalization. Hence he sees performance (a) as systematically distinct from other ways of speaking and (b) as distinguished in the sense of having an exalted, extraordinary quality (8). Furthermore, developing the idea of cognitive/interpretive 'frames' as first used by G. Bateson and E. Goffman, he comes close to equating frame with 'genre' (25). This would mean that genre is given the higher logical status (in that performance is one genre among others). I would like to place performance at a higher level of classification (such that performance encompasses many genres). Bauman more recently (1986) proposed to distinguish between performance as practice, cultural performance, and the poetics of oral performance. Within this much wider frame I would situate my concerns somewhere between the first and the second approaches. On the 'logical status' of performance in this study, see pp. 13f.

ized up to this point. They have in common an empirical orientation, to verbal expressions, oral texts, and communicative events. Theoretically, these approaches emerged from critiques of various kinds of linguistics or linguistically inspired theories of cultural knowledge (text philology, structuralism, formal semantics, generativism). Orientation to language and linguistics, however, meant that certain aims and purposes have been shared among the critics and the criticized. "Performance," while signalling recognition of pragmatic, social, and esthetic uses of language, also stands for a program that seeks to extend the search for "rules and regularities" from language to speaking (see, e.g., Hymes in Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975). In other words, sociolinguistically inspired uses of performance in anthropology, folklore studies, and related fields, often advocate a certain methodologization, a greater descriptive rigor, even if most of the proponents now reject excessive formalism.

Different from this is a trend that, although it shares some of the research interests and many intellectual preferences of the former, uses "performance" in a sense that is at once more literal and methodologically more diffuse. It is inspired above all by the work of Victor Turner and takes spectacular ritual, social drama, and theatricality in general as its points of departure. "Experience" (rather than communication or speaking), "symbols," and "interpretation" or "hermeneutics" (rather than text, speech events, and rules) are the keywords of its discourse.⁹ Turner himself intended this focus on performance as a humanization of anthropology, as saving it from theoretical and descriptive pedantry and as a way of reintroducing an element of fun into its teaching. His recommendations also include many points of epistemological significance (for instance, the notion of reflexivity, which he ties to performative acts). His enthusiasm has influenced others and the revision of anthropology he promoted has brought about one of the most salutary changes to affect our discipline in recent decades even though certain elements in his thought remain open for criticism (some of which we will discuss later on).

Simply as a matter of completeness it should be noted that notions of performance also play a role in sociological analyses inspired by the brilliant, if somewhat ethnocentric, descriptions of public interpersonal behavior given by E. Goffman and in investigations where anthropological and psychological-cognitive interests converge.¹⁰

⁹ See a collection of essays by Turner published posthumously, 1986; his contributions to Ruby 1982 and Turner and Bruner 1986, but also Singer 1972, Geertz 1980, and Fernandez 1986.

¹⁰ Goffman's work, with references to his most important publications, is discussed in Schechner 1986. The cognitive use of notions such as "frame" was already mentioned, see Bauman 1984: 11ff., and a survey by Casson 1983, especially on the

Some Ideas Guiding this Study

Concepts and methods directly derived from the ethnography of speaking (or sociolinguistics) have served me well in the past; and the "discovery" which became a starting point for this study has led me to pay more attention to Turnerian "anthropology of performance" than I have previously. At the same time, I now find some problems in the sociolinguistic as well as in the theatrical approaches which, I believe, cannot be solved by enlightened eclecticism alone. Therefore I now include in these introductory reflections a summary of issues that arise when "performance" is applied in the context of a specific project such as this study.

(1) The first question regards the nature of cultural knowledge and the nature of knowledge of cultural knowledge. How introducing "performance" into thought about these matters might affect conceptions of ethnography has already been spelled out in some detail. But perhaps it is useful to add the following qualifications: First, performing is here understood in contrast to informing. This is a matter of epistemological preference, not of ontology. Performances may inform; information may require performances to be realized. But usually theories of ethnographic knowledge are built on models of information transfer, of transmission of (somehow preexisting) messages via signs, symbols, or codes. Perhaps they are descriptively useful; epistemologically they are deficient because they fail to account for historically contingent creation of information in and through the events in which messages are said to be transmitted. Second, the ethnography of speaking (and some kinds of ethnomethodology, or the analyses of E. Goffman, E. T. Hall, and others) continue, by and large, to view ethnographic research in terms of clear role differences between researcher and researched. This has probably been one reason why questions of intersubjectivity and shared praxis are often bracketed when it comes to observing and describing communicative events. The notion of performance I am exploring here proposes to abandon hierarchical (or, in D. Tedlock's word, "analogical")¹¹ definitions of relationship between observer and observed, questioner and questioned. Performing is in essence "giving form to." Giving form to only occurs whenever communicative exchanges are

closely related concepts of "scripts" for performance. Finally, in my search through the literature I also came across performance studies which turned out to be concerned with classifying and measuring how humans perform tasks (see Fleishman 1984). This approach would seem to have no relevance whatsoever to our project; but perhaps it would be interesting to ask whether we have here just an accident of polysemy.

¹¹ See Fabian 1974, 1979a, 1985, 1986.

¹² See Tedlock 1983, chap. 16.

initiated that involve all participants, including, of course, the ethnographer.

(2) Implied in the position just described is that emphasis on performance serves to stress *the role of time* in the production of ethnographic knowledge—of duration, timing, and, above all, of shared time. That the relation between the anthropologist and his interlocutors must be coeval in order to produce “results”¹³ is evident when both are seen as participants in performances. Temporality asserts itself also through the fact that performances are tied to *répétition*, repetition and rehearsal. There would be no reason to qualify performance as a process (“a sequence of acts” would do) unless it is admitted that repetition *in real time* is as essential to what we called “giving form to” as it is to dancing or to playing a piece of music. The qualification “in real time” is necessary to distinguish this notion of repetition from concepts of linguistic recurrency or sociological predictability (both of which have certain uses in understanding performance; but this is not the point here). An image that keeps coming up as I think about the texts and performances around the theme “le pouvoir se mange entier” to which this study is devoted is that of an iceberg. Performance is the visible tip; rehearsal/repetition the submerged body. Such a spatial or corporeal image may at first seem an inappropriate evocation of process yet it helps to clarify an important insight. As the tip of the iceberg does not represent its submerged part, cultural performances do not symbolize the work of repetition and rehearsal. They are *carried* by that work; there is an unbroken, material connection which is metonymic, not metaphorical. As far as I can see, process can—productively—only be conceived of metonymically. To relate this to our earlier discussion of uses of performance in anthropology: I share with the ethnography of speaking a processual view and I agree with Turner’s more literal, theatrical idea in that speech events ought not to be isolated by synchronic analysis from their embeddedness in repetition and rehearsal in real time.¹⁴

This may have wider significance. If the material for anthropology is events rather than things, and if ethnography is unlike a collection of artifacts but like a repetition of performances, then it is in principle impossible for a culture to appear or be witnessed at a given time as anything but the tip of an iceberg. That tip is not (certainly not only) a token of the submerged body. It is a part, a moment of a process. At least, this should be our epistemological point of departure; that all cultures we know of also construct tokens, symbols, and representations

13. The idea of coevalness is developed in Fabian 1983.

14. Turner himself acknowledges “temporalization” as crucial in the turn toward postmodern anthropology which is signalled by concern with performance, see 1986: 76, 79f.

is a second-order theoretical proposition. In this way, thought about performance may lead to a materialist rather than symbolic position.

Time is of course but one of the dimensions that constitute communicative events as performances (albeit the most crucial one as long as we consider talking essential to intercultural communication). Perceptions of space, of movement, of objects and landscapes also deserve attention, as do tactile experiences, smells, tastes.

(3) Another line of demarcation needs to be drawn against “sociologizing” the concept of performance. After all, performing can easily be equated with enacting and one might justifiably ask what performance theory has to offer that has not already been adequately formulated in one or another sociological theory of action. The difference that justifies giving precision to action by calling it performance is this: In the standard sociological view (let us assume for the sake of the argument that there is such a thing and take Parsonian action theory as its classical incarnation) social action is social because individual actors act and interact, guided by values and beliefs which they have internalized as part of a shared culture. There is a platonic element in this inasmuch as sociality is exalted (as by Durkheim), but also in the sense that it is posited to predate any concrete enactment. From the point of view of contingent social acts, society and culture share the attributes of the deity—they are transcendent, immutable, unassailable (or they must at least be imagined as such in order to assure order and equilibrium in the social system). Performance, as I like to think of it here, certainly is action, but not merely enactment of a preexisting script; it is making, fashioning, creating. What I called sociality (better, perhaps: social praxis) is, in this view, the result of a multitude of actors working together to give form to experiences, ideas, feelings, projects. Performance can therefore have a guiding function in investigations where we encounter neither social order nor equilibrium, nor a homogenous shared culture embodying undisputed values and norms.

(4) Some remarks are now in order regarding the logical status of the concept “performance” in this study. Given its multiple filiation and complicated history, I do not pretend that all ambiguity can be removed, nor do I think that unambiguous concepts are very useful (unless they are parts of axiomatic constructs). Nevertheless, some of the possible sources of confusion ought to be pointed out now.

First, the proposition that performance might be crucial to our understanding of the nature of culture as well as of knowledge about culture is not meant to be reversible. Not everything that is crucial to culture and to knowledge about culture is performance.

Second, and perhaps more serious are the dangers of misplaced concreteness that always loom when scientific discourse makes use of

concepts that come along carrying a heavy load of cultural connotations. Depending on whether the sources of inspiration are religious rites, theater, dance and music, or some other activity which *our* culture designates as performance, there is always the problem of avoiding extensions of the concept that displace our understanding laterally into the realm of similes and metaphors. In this manner, our understanding may be enriched, but its critical edge may also be dulled. Anthropologists should by now have had enough bad experience with topoi such as kinship, tribe, ritual, myth, magic, and so forth, to know that such seemingly innocent classifications amount to intellectual verdicts that serve to establish cultural distance and hegemony. Performance, in other words, should not be projected onto the societies whose images of theatricality we study in order to contrast them with our own, which we see as engaged in serious business.

Third, even if such a critical awareness is acquired in general, there is still the problem of avoiding equivocation in specific applications. On the one hand, I introduced "performance" as a concept marking an epistemological position; on the other, most of this study (apart from the reflections on proverbs) is based on material documenting actual theatrical performance. Am I therefore tailoring my ethnography to fit epistemological requirements, or is it the other way round? I don't think that it is desirable to formulate rules or safeguards that would eliminate ambiguity on this point. Nor do I want to dignify what might be in fact a weakness by declaring it a hermeneutic circle. The only safeguard I know of is to keep the account at all times open—open, that is, to the contingencies of the actual, social, and political context in which this ethnography has been produced. What I mean by openness will be spelled out in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

(5) Finally, attention to performance also determines *the aims of description*. When we give ethnographic accounts as accounts of performances we may employ various formal devices in order to highlight or summarize findings about the structure of events. But the aim cannot be, in any but the most loose sense of the terms, to define "rules" or construct "grammars." The ethnographer participates in, and gives accounts of, performances because he or she wants to report *what is given* form to.¹⁵ That cultural content, always the result of contingent historical processes, could be generated from sets of abstract, transhistorical principles (be they structures of the mind, basic needs, or what not) is in my view extraneous to the tasks of cultural anthropology.

On the other hand, a focus on performance, will make it impossible to affect false descriptive modesty, as if the ethnographer's task were

15. See Fabian 1979a for a more detailed exposition of this argument.

just to present "scripts," cultural texts that speak for themselves. Those lasting objectifications of events that we produce through recordings, transcripts, and translations are without any doubt material for the "work of interpretation," as Tedlock calls it. But the book which carries that phrase as part of its title (1983) also demonstrates that records of the spoken word cannot be conceived of as data leading an existence independent of the projects in the course of which they were obtained. The passage from Vansina quoted above underlines this point.

Conversely, when actual records, texts, are included in the presentation this is not only, as it were, a matter of ethics or politeness ("giving a voice to our informants") nor a matter of literary theory (recognizing multiple authorship). It is required by the claim that such writing give accounts and interpretation of processes. Like verbal communication itself, ethnographic presentation may appear full of redundancy if measured by standards that presuppose an ideal reader, a perfect match of content and form between text and translation, and complete sets of findings covering the, and only the, announced subject of research. Parimony is a supreme value for those who already know; ethnographers, although some of them can say what they have to say more clearly and succinctly than others, are destined to tell baroque and tortuous tales.

Moving Ahead: Performance and Survival

J'ai connu des sociétés composées uniquement de sociologues. Ils avaient un talent fou, dans la veille et le récit. Nous sortons à peine de cette Antiquité, nous ne sommes pas tous sortis de cette pauvreté qui a duré d'âges mythiques jusqu'à naguère. Je me souviens de sociétés mythiques tout entières saisies dans la représentation, endormies dans le langage. La pauvreté ne se mesure pas seulement au pain mais à la parole, pas seulement au manque de pain mais à l'excès, à l'exclusivité, à la prison des paroles. La langue croît quand manque le pain. Quand le pain vient, la bouche, longtemps affamée, a trop de travail pour, en plus, s'occuper de parler. Nous avons appris à aimer les objets.

Michel Serres¹⁶

16. See *Les cinq sens* (1985: 38f.). Here is my translation:

I have known societies consisting only of sociologists. They had an incredible talent for staying up late and telling stories. We have just emerged from such ancient times, and not all of us have left this impoverished state which lasted from the mythical ages until not long ago. I remember mythical societies which were completely caught up in representation, asleep in language. Poverty is not only

Until now, this brief account suggests that the uses which social scientists have made of performance may be found somewhere between two possibilities: Either they methodologize performance such that the concept can cover almost any sort of action or they celebrate performance as an artistic achievement in which case the concept should be reserved to acts of extraordinary intensity and heightened significance. However, these differences appear less important as soon as one considers what most of their proponents share. No matter, whether preferences go to smooth routine or to rousing drama, performance theory tends to share two shortcomings with its predecessors: positivity and political naïveté.

By positivity (which may also appear as "authenticity") I mean the tendency to privilege theoretically and empirically, as "the rule," behavior which affirms or enacts presumed societal values. Conversely, action that denies, contests, lacks commitment, or simply dissimulates will be qualified as anything between curious and deviant. That this is a matter of theoretical inclination, not a logical concomitant of a focus on performance can be seen as soon as we recall the subtle analyses of clowning, insinuation, and subterfuge we have from folklorists and sociolinguists,¹⁷ or Victor Turner's struggles with negativity in the form of antistructure.¹⁸ I hope that this study will contribute to arguments that negativity needs to be incorporated into our basic conceptualizations of social praxis instead of being relegated to deviance or domesticated as drama, that is, "normal conflict" or, worse, "dynamics." This is especially important when we subsume the phenomena we investigate under the concept of popular culture. It is a notion that has been instrumental in

measured by bread but also by speech, not only by a lack of bread but also by an excess of words, by their exclusive claim, and by being imprisoned by words.

Language grows when bread is lacking. When the bread comes, the mouth, which has gone hungry for so long, is too much occupied to go on talking. We have learned to love objects.

I believe—though I do not agree with most of Serres's larger argument concerning the superiority of the natural sciences—that this outrageous reflection is useful when we think about verbal performance under conditions of material deprivation.

17. See Bauman's insightful remarks on the disputability of performance (1984: 29, 44f) and the many concrete examples of playful but serious dissimulation in the work of Roger Abrahams (1972, 1975); see also Abrahams and Bauman 1971. That "participatory discrepancies"—deviating from the perfect score—may belong to the essence of successful musical performance has recently been argued by Charles Keil (1987) in an essay that contains much food for thought on performance in general.

18. See, for example, his essay "Metaphors of Anti-structure in Religious Culture" (1974). My own attempt to "recapture the negative" I formulated in Fabian 1979b. See also Washabaugh 1979 applying the notion of antistructure to languages such as the one on which this ethnography is based.

removing the stigma of inauthenticity from vigorous, creative expressions which do not conform to standards of "high" or "traditional" culture, but it also carries the constant danger of condescending folklorization.

Political naïveté is perhaps the more serious of the two shortcomings I see in some performance theory. Fascination with the communicative, esthetically creative, inspiring, and entertaining qualities of cultural performances all too easily make us overlook that the people who perform relate to each other and to their society at large in terms of power. Again, this does not only apply to the "normal" differential distribution of might and influence wherever a multitude of people are engaged in common projects (this is why the matter is not taken care of by introducing the notion of differential roles into the analysis of performance). Recognition of power relations acquires a heightened significance when we investigate societies under colonial domination or postcolonial, quasi-totalitarian regimes, where expression of opinion, social criticism, and the free play of imagination are severely restricted. Colonial rulers and their successors have been aware of these threats and challenges and often have, with true machiavellian determination, encouraged performance as entertainment and as a way of channeling or co-opting social protest (later on, we will provide some detail on how this works). There is, therefore, always the possibility that an interest in the creations of popular culture which professes to be strictly academic and theoretical works into the hands of oppressors. I should hope this study will avoid such naïveté, partly because, on reflection, I have become aware of it, but much more so because the Zairians who allowed me to be part of this ethnography of power saw to it that their own political predicaments were expressed, albeit in ways that often are not immediately clear to the outsider.

The points I am trying to make here can be clarified by some observations on the direction Victor Turner's thought took in his last essays before his untimely death in 1983. For some years he had been moving away from ritual interpreted as social drama to a more literal concern with theatrical performance. Together with this apparent narrowing of focus, however, went a theoretical reorientation. It is as if he had become disenchanted with the rather flat moralism or sociology that besets metaphorizing social conflict as "drama" (what I qualified as "positivity"), on the one hand, and with the temptations of noncommittal estheticism (one form of what I called political naïveté), on the other. Turner began to feel the need to ground performance, to seek its foundations in those depths of human acting that are about survival. To the consternation, I imagine, of many who had followed him as one of the prophets of symbolic anthropology, he proposed to look for these

foundations in the evolutionary history of the human species and its neuro-physiological equipment.¹⁹ With that he chose an option that is not new in anthropology: Lévi-Strauss comes to mind, perhaps also the more original and interesting thought of Gregory Bateson,²⁰ not to mention the renaissance of evolutionism associated with the rise of sociology. In one sense, these visions express a yearning for a scientific grounding of anthropology. But, until we have better solutions to the problem of translating the results of scientific experiments (which are formulated and reported on in terms of quantitative measures and mathematical probability) into historical accounts, such scientific grounding quickly degenerates into metaphysics, at best, and ideology, at worst.²¹ I share Turner's conviction that our inquiries into cultural performances need to be grounded in something that is real, something more serious than the contemplation of drama. Yet, as long as our contributions to knowledge are based on participation in uncontrolled, contingent events, I doubt that we can find anything "harder" than political praxis. I, at least, am unable to see how reductions to brain structure and ethology could justify explanations or interpretations of performance that would lead us to ignore historically established conditions of power and oppression.

Let me now come to a conclusion of sorts. These reflections began with the report on a discovery: "Performance" seemed to be a more adequate description both of the ways people realize their culture and of the method by which an ethnographer produces knowledge about that culture. In search for a catching phrase to designate the reorientation which that discovery would entail I proposed to move "from informative to performative ethnography." This has epistemological significance inasmuch as I recommend an approach that is appropriate to both the nature of cultural knowledge and the nature of knowledge of cultural knowledge. But the recommended reorientation also has a historical, political background.

It does not take much reflection to suspect that what appears as a merely theoretical advance is in fact related to changes in research

19. See his essay "Body, Brain, and Culture" in 1986, and Schechner 1986. Schechner worked with Turner during his last years.

20. Summarized perhaps most poignantly in Bateson 1979.

21. I cannot resist citing a similar expression of skepticism made forty years ago by none other than Norbert Wiener. He acknowledges the interesting contacts he had with Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead concerning the applicability of cybernetics to social systems. Yet he puts a damper on their and other social scientists' hopes precisely because he is aware of what I called translation problems from statistics to human concerns (see Wiener 1948: 33f.).

practice dictated by other than academic considerations. Informative ethnography—collecting data and information about another culture—corresponds to a political situation of more or less direct control, one in which the ethnographer as the emissary of the dominant power (wittingly or not) has the upper hand; where he or she can ask the questions, determine what counts as information, control the situations in which it is to be gathered, and so forth. Performative ethnography—the kind where the ethnographer does not call the tune but plays along—would be the approach that fits situations where our societies no longer exercise direct control. There is some truth in this and future critics of anthropology will probably point to the hard realities of changed political relations when it comes to account for the emergence, in the sixties and seventies, of humanistic, communicative, and dialogical anthropology (as a program, not just a matter of human decency).

However, although exploring the idea of performance is for me a way to continue with communicative approaches, it also makes me realize that more is involved than adjusting to changed political situations, or rather, that more thought needs to be given to exactly what the changes from colonial to postcolonial relations amounts to. If anything, domination has intensified. Western imperialism is all the more pervasive and powerful for having become an absentee regime of organizations that remain anonymous to the ruled. "Improved" communications technology and intensified circulation of consumer goods see to it that more and more of the things Africans know and like are shaped and selected outside. Locally, governments and regimes who are powerless in global terms must compensate for lack of legitimacy with measures that are either oppressive or corrupt, and often both. If we further consider that increasing integration into a world system goes together, for most Zaireans, with pauperization that does not seem able to hit bottom, then we realize that there is nothing in the postcolonial situation that would make ethnography by and of itself more humane, playful, or fun, or that would make "performance" a more germane concept to describe its nature. No, the kind of performances we find in popular culture have become for the people involved more than ever ways to preserve some self-respect in the face of constant humiliation, and to set the wealth of artistic creativity against an environment of utter poverty. All this is not to be dismissed off-hand as escape from reality; it is realistic praxis under the concrete political and economic conditions that reign.

This brings me once more to some thoughts about "performance" that are likely to cause consternation among no-nonsense practitioners of the social sciences who have kept their faith in straightforward scientific inquiry. One of the connotations from which performance

should not be purified is that of being just performance, of putting up an act, of tricking and dissimulating. Colonial history, and social history in general, have taught us that the "shuffle and dance" to which the oppressed had to resort in everything, from how they speak their languages to the ways they move, and the manner in which they relate to those in power, have been so many ways of surviving. An ethnography/anthropology that does not contemplate performance from a safe distance but realizes that it must itself become performance will—correctly—be qualified as "shuffle and dance" by those who have never experienced difficulties with the methods and approaches we inherited from times when our discipline fought for, and achieved, academic respectability as a positive science.

Superficially, what I am more insinuating than expounding here may look similar to arguments that are advanced in favor of a post-modern anthropology. But I cannot overcome a profound sense of distrust in postmodernism. Although some of it is motivated by reflections on research experience such as mine, much is inspired by problems we have with our own literary practice in which those whom we investigate do not directly participate. If the proponents of postmodernism tell us that nothing is to be taken seriously about anthropology (because nothing about it is real) and that free experimentation in the sphere of representations is all that remains, then this reminds me of a saying attributed to Woody Allen: "Symbols are extra." Indeed, literary *déguisement* of anthropology is a luxury which we owe to the wealth our societies extract from the ones we purport to study.²²

22. The most encompassing collection of essays on anthropology in the post-modern spirit is the one edited by Clifford and Marcus (1986). A companion piece—at once partial refutation, or at least gently chiding, and a demonstration of how literary appreciation of anthropology is done—is Geertz's latest essay (1988). Let my remarks be misunderstood as a defense of modernism. I want to say that books such as *Writing Culture* and an earlier study by Boon (1982) represent a significant step forward in the critique of anthropology. It is just that I am wary of a critique that is not constantly made to confront ethnography "on the ground."

2

The "Problem": Power and Cultural Axiom

In the project I am undertaking with this study, preoccupation with performance, apart from being forced on me by circumstances, grew out of epistemological concerns. Not the idea that social life consists of performances, but an insight that knowledge about social life is, in important respects, performative rather than informative, has been my starting point. That a theatrical play, a performance or series of performances in the most literal sense of the term, will eventually be the empirical core of this book, does not, in my view, weaken the epistemological argument; it only makes it more urgent and interesting.

In this chapter, I want to show that sociocultural performances (social drama, ritual, story-telling, interpersonal games)—so many ways of conceptualizing the "how" of interaction—are not the problem I started out addressing; what made me undertake this uncertain journey has been a "what." Even though I shall eventually offer some generalizations, as does every author of social scientific discourse, I did not start out by applying generalized concepts or interpretive schemes to interesting data. Nor did I have in mind a contribution to a specialized subdiscipline such as linguistic or political anthropology. I simply began by being intrigued with a specific pronouncement, ostensibly about the nature of power, made by specific persons on a specific occasion. Did what was said express actual experience with power? Did it posit some conventional or ultimate principles? Or both? Was it an echo of a traditional way of life, or did it speak to the present situation? Or both? Could a saying that so obviously made sense to those who quoted it help me understand what at that time was my own principal quest ("revisiting" a religious movement that I had first studied almost twenty years earlier and finding it alive yet transformed and engaged in a new struggle)?

I shall now report on the event that triggered my questioning. I will then look at a few ethnographic sources in order to provide some wider context and historical depth. I shall conclude with some reflections that