



SPEAKING ABOUT ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

Janice Boddy

As an undergraduate student at McGill University I was caught up in the wave of interest in myth and ritual, structuralism, and cultural symbolism that swept anthropology in the early 1970s. That focus continued through my Master's thesis on popular culture—advertising—into my doctoral program at the University of British Columbia, where Claude Lévi-Strauss had visited (the year before I arrived) to study myths of the North West Coast. In a film by the National Film Board I saw his masterful account of symbolic transformation between two North West Coast ritual masks (*Behind the Masks*, 1973), and I was smitten. Apart from Lévi-Strauss, my main inspirations at the time were Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, Gregory Bateson, Edmund Leach, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and James Fernandez. The feminist turn in anthropology was just getting underway, and though I was familiar with early feminist scholarship, I resisted identification as someone interested in “the anthropology of women.”

In 1976 I began doctoral fieldwork in Hofriyat, a contemporary village near the site of ancient Meroe in northern Sudan. I went planning to study the *zar*, a set of

spirit possession beliefs and practices found throughout the Nile Valley and Horn of Africa that is typically the domain of women. The experience challenged all my presuppositions. As I learned local Arabic and gradually became familiar with Hofriyati women's world, I realized that my theoretical toolkit was inadequate to the task of understanding what was going on. Instead, following villagers' lead, I began to trace how and in what contexts they used certain words, specifically adjectives describing states of value. I learned that, for Hofriyati, meaning was immanent in qualities shared by persons and things, and could not be described independently of them. Thus, rather than resting on dualistic relations, as when a symbol stands for something else that constitutes its meaning, Hofriyati cultural logic was constructed through metonymy: everything was part of something else, each fragment of meaning led to another, and then another, in a recursive chain of significance that did not resolve to an underlying explanation but stood as its own truth. My analyses of the symbolic context of pharaonic circumcision in Hofriyat (1982) and of *zar* (1988, 1989) were informed by

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this realization. I have found the works of Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern to be valuable for fathoming cultural logics, and also the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu. But above all I have been inspired by Clifford Geertz's (1973) example of imaginative ethnographic interpretation. Selves are formed and bodies shaped in dynamic interaction between people and their humanly constructed environment of objects, spaces, others—through practical engagement with the world that they themselves make and that indeed makes them.

Zar is in part a comment on local power relations, and as such Antonio Gramsci's appreciation of hegemony and the complexities of political subordination has

been helpful for understanding its dynamics, as has the ethnographically nuanced feminist anthropology of the 1980s and beyond (e.g., Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Collier and Yanagisako 1987). My later work on British interventions into women's health and education in colonial Sudan (1998, 2007) is also indebted to Michel Foucault's discussion of biopower. Perhaps my theoretical approach could best be described as "grounded eclecticism": while drawing on scholarship of several theoretical stripes, I remain convinced that the greatest ethnographic insights come from careful listening and writing, assembling the ethnographic data so as to reveal the analysis they contain.

Janice Boddy is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto. Among her many publications are *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) and *Civilizing Women: British Crusades in Colonial Sudan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). For other works cited in this essay, see *Speaking About Anthropological Theory* in the Sources and Suggested Reading at the end of this book.