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978-0-521-10534-7 - Symbolic Structures: An Exploration of the Culture of the Dowayos

Nigel Barley

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Preface

It is a hot, sticky day even by West African standards. A mid-afternoon drowsiness hangs over the hillside village. At one side of a small dusty compound a group of men are crouched, giggling and joking as they work. Before them stands a spherical water-jar that they are decorating with strips of cloth, horsetails and strange, metal objects. It is clear that the men have been drinking. At one stage, they have broken off their work and demanded more drink before consenting to continue.

Over the other side of the compound, a white man, an anthropologist, is slumped in the shade, notebook and camera abandoned beside him. He is haggard, having just suffered a bad bout of malaria. His hands tremble with incipient hepatitis. He sweats profusely and tries to keep his befogged mind on the events taking place before him. Slightly to one side, is another white man, a dentist, an American fresh from the United States. He glows with health and alert interest. He is simply visiting the area for the day, making a brief excursion from the world of mission bungalows and international hotels to see life in the bush for himself. He turns to the anthropologist and smiles endearingly. 'Why are they doing this?' he asks politely. 'What does the jar mean?'

The anthropologist begins to mutter an interpretation. Each explanatory statement seems to demand four more to justify and interpret the one before. The dentist looks puzzled and disappointed. The anthropologist feels he is letting down his audience and betraying his art. He tries harder. Before he knows where he is, he is giving an introductory lecture on symbolic interpretation. The dentist looks more puzzled, then bored. His attention wanders and he begins to examine the state of the men's teeth as they joke with each other. The anthropologist detects the loss of attention and promises to write to his companion, explaining the whole thing better. This book is the result of that promise.

My dentist had had the benefit of some introductory courses in anthropology, which is doubtless why he assumed in the first place that the jar 'meant' something. The 'meaning' of the jar is the problem about which this work will revolve.

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In a work of anthropology, it is customary to begin with some sort of a description of the general ethnographic background. This serves the useful purpose of locating the people firmly in space and time and separating them from the undifferentiated mass of 'primitive man'. Whatever the virtues for the reader of such an approach, for the writer it is a valuable device, conveying in a small space what would otherwise have to be introduced piecemeal throughout the work in the form of footnotes, unnecessarily impeding the flow and clogging the analysis.

At the end of this work, I append a detailed description of a number of important Dowayo festivals that have been treated in the text. This admittedly constitutes a somewhat indigestible whole but will be appreciated by the serious student who will wish to check analyses for himself. I have made this section as full as was possible. One of the major failings of current work on symbolic studies is partiality. What it cannot incorporate in its description, it simply fails to notice. It is hoped that this section will allow students to judge for themselves to what degree the lowest levels of descriptive adequacy have been achieved and perhaps to improve the work by their own contributions.

The language of the Dowayo people, which for reasons of simplicity I shall term Dowayo, is tonal.¹ It has four static tones that can be combined to form glides. The depiction of these in the orthography is a complex and costly business and at the moment of writing no final decision has been made between ONAREST in Cameroon and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (which has conducted research into the language under the direction of Elizabeth and Marinus Wiering) as to what orthographic system should be adopted. I have therefore found it expedient to omit marking of tones as these can have no value for those unfluent in the tongue and may be easily inferred by those few who are. Again, for reasons of general convenience, I mark the change from open to closed vowel by the addition of *h* (i.e. *e* is the vowel of Fr. *elle*, while *eh* is the final vowel of Fr. *aimé*). Crossing of consonants indicates glottalisation; tilde over a word indicates nasalisation.

A number of diagrams are used in the course of the work. An attempt has been made to develop each from those that precede it, so that they constitute one of the principal sources of continuity.