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978-0-521-62737-5 - Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspectives from Africa and Melanesia

Edited by Michael Lambek and Andrew Strathern

Excerpt

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1 Introduction Embodying sociality: Africanist-Melanesianist comparisons

Andrew Strathern and Michael Lambek

This volume brings together a series of intensive investigations by Africanists and Melanesianists on the relations between persons and bodies. We did not give the contributors narrow instructions but wished to discover the range of strategies and approaches they would take to this topic. Specifically we were interested in how the broad interest in the body currently evident in a range of disciplines across the academy would be refracted in the ethnography of non-Western societies, and conversely what such investigations would have to contribute to the general debate as well as to the advancement of theory within anthropology itself. Our reasons for selecting Africanists and Melanesianists are advanced below, but in brief we wanted to see how models derived from work in each area might speak to each other. An underlying aim of the book is thus to advance ethnographic comparison, a theme we take up in more general terms at the end of the Introduction.

Africanist and Melanesianist traditions: a continuing dialogue

This project developed out of a sense that close work among regional specialists, while necessary and often exhilarating, is not enough. With the supremacy of the regionalist view (as manifested, for example, in course titles or job advertisements), it has become increasingly necessary to focus one's reading on a specific geographical region of study. As the number of monographs has grown, it has been harder to keep up, and one of the things that seems to have declined is reading between regions. To the degree that this is true, one can assume that Africanist and Melanesianist scholarship have gradually begun to grow apart, their common reading situated at the level of general theory rather than ethnography. This is exceedingly unfortunate. Whatever one's view of the most appropriate mode of comparison, and the obvious value of intraregional comparison notwithstanding, it seems clear that one should draw insight from, and shed light upon, the work of ethnographers in other geographic regions.¹

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Hence in developing this book we have gone against the grain of recent collections which tend, when they explicitly consider issues of ethnographic representativeness at all, either to have a strong but narrow regional focus or to be deliberately “cross-cultural,” seeking contributions from as wide a selection of societies as possible. Here we want to build on the strengths of the regional tradition of comparison while attempting to avoid the risks of parochialism. We could equally well have selected other regions and one model for continuing our work would be to add successive regions in a kind of spiraling conversation.²

Inevitably, given publishing constraints, our group of Melanesianists and Africanists is smaller than we would have liked. In selecting contributors we have not given great attention to trying to ensure significant intraregional “representativeness.” In a continent as large and diverse as Africa that would be impossible (the very idea of speaking about Africa as a region is in some respects ludicrous³), and Melanesian work has also been for some time broken down into subregions not all of which are represented here. Nor is it obvious what the criteria for representativeness would be. We did consciously attempt to add to our complement of North American authors some who are European trained, thus transecting the “regional” dimension with a trans-Atlantic one based on “schools.”⁴ We also deliberately included a high proportion of relatively young people, fresh from the field or engaged in active field projects.

Juxtaposing conventionally labeled ethnographic regions in a comparative project and implying thereby that some privileged axis of analysis exists between them could well be considered a provocative and risky act: Africa and Melanesia? After the work of Arjun Appadurai on the dangers of misidentifying localities and mystifying maps one might question what the point is of such a comparative exercise (Appadurai 1988). There are two answers, neither of which depends on any regional or typological characterizations as such. The first is that a good deal of the kind of ethnography recognized as “classic” has been carried out in these two parts of the world, and it is interesting to see how common themes are taken up at different times in relation to “Africa” and “Melanesia.” In practice, we are looking both at thematic concepts (for example, “witchcraft” and “sorcery”) and at analytical ones (for example, “descent group” or “personhood”) as they swing into and out of anthropological fashion.

We have to ask what the purpose of making comparisons is. Some contemporary anthropologists act as though comparisons are indeed odious and all we can do is produce specific accounts, *petits récits*. However, such a position is in practice internally inconsistent, since there is no such thing as a descriptive account that does not appeal to some general

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categories. Every *petit récit* draws on a *grand récit* somewhere at its back or in its words. But it is important to distinguish between such an implicit procedure of relying on comparison as classification (e.g. in sentences like “this is a descent group”) and explicit procedures which attempt to construct comparison as a means of portraying and explaining difference (e.g. “descent groups in society A differ from those in B because . . . fill in your preference”).

We choose the example of the term “descent group” advisedly because it was a stock-in-trade term in the ethnography of the 1960s and 1970s and debates raged over it. In Melanesianist ethnography there was a passage of interest from descent to exchange, and thence to personhood via gender. Now all of these themes seem to crowd into the topic of the body and embodiment. “Good” ethnographies practically must say something about “the body” nowadays. It is worthwhile therefore to consider how “the body” as a topic may configure comparatively as categories such as descent group or personhood have done.

Second, it happens that exercises of “tacking backwards and forwards” have already been done between Africanists and Melanesianists. We can use such exercises as foils to the present one which deals with “bodies and persons.” One thing we are *not* seeking is to provide substantive empirical generalizations (turning *comparison* into *classification*). It is rather the other way round. Starting with a category such as “body” or “person,” we want to see how these interrelate *differently* across a range of cases. Here the Africanist/Melanesianist axis is useful because as it happens African models, drawn from acephalous tribal contexts, were first employed to try to make sense of group processes in the new ethnographic region of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea from the 1960s onwards. Difficulties with these applications then rebounded onto the African ethnographic contexts and the potential for a dialectical dialogue was set up. The first phase of debate was of considerably more use to Melanesianists than to Africanists. Indeed it could be argued that it led the former into exciting new theoretical terrain, if only via negation (M. Strathern 1990). It was in part Lambek’s feeling that this new terrain could in turn be important to Africanists, especially when concerned with issues of embodiment and personhood, that led him to respond to an overture from A. Strathern. Melanesian ethnography is of interest to Africanists not only for the emphasis put on exchange, especially embodied exchange, but because “the manner in which Melanesian . . . relations are objectified, elicits a particular challenge to *particular* Western concepts of personhood and the nature of bonds between persons” (M. Strathern 1990:212). These Western concepts may have characterized the work of Africanists. Or, indeed, it is possible that African conceptions of persons

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lie closer to the Western ones than do Melanesian conceptions. Obviously these are controversial points but they are ones which bear investigation.⁵

In any case, the criss-crossing effort at making analyses with other analyses in mind went into abeyance for a while. Descent groups vanished as a focus for analysis, replaced on both ethnographic fronts by colonialism, the analysis of domination, gender, production etc. The new list of topics in turn called for a new form of integration, supplied by personhood and embodiment. Rita Astuti's paper in this volume draws attention to the ongoing potentialities inherent in making Africa/Melanesia contrasts and then subverting these on either side. Edward LiPuma's paper utilizes the strategy of double subversion in deconstructing contrasts that have been deployed between Melanesian and Western ideas on personhood (cf. Battaglia 1995b). Ellen Corin provides a remarkably complementary analysis with reference to the African context. She applies a contrast between approaches by European, primarily francophone, anthropologists that have focused on cultural categories of the person and North American concerns with subjective experiences of the self in order to undercut radical distinctions between so-called sociocentric and egocentric societies. Strathern and Stewart provide an explicit comparison of Melpa and Nuer notions of the value of human life and the histories of compensation for taking a life in the two places.

It is interesting to reflect that there are two fundamental shifts in interest here. One is from the typological to the processual. The other is from collectivity to sociality, but it should be remembered that the one does not necessarily exclude the other. They represent rather two different moments of modeling our understandings of human social life. And since it is quite obvious that personhood is partly defined in terms of group identities the levels are empirically linked also.

Nevertheless the disjuncture is there. In the 1960s social anthropologists tended to compare elements called group structures. Nowadays anthropology is faced with the quandary of not quite knowing what to compare with what and what comparative propositions, if any, will emerge from the enterprise. Bold generalizations about Melanesia done in a post-structuralist manner may arouse doubt as to their range of reference and verifiability. There is always the danger – or creative opportunity – of the ethnocentric model, the imposition or denial of difference in which we seem to be asking “why are the x not like the y?,” starting out from x or y as the base, the implicit norm, a procedure that is patently arbitrary. Yet we have no other real recourse. Proceeding from the (supposedly) known to the (putatively) unknown depends always on such initial points. It depends also on the use of analytical “stretcher terms” (on which, we might say, to carry the body of theory). “Body” is one such

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term; it functions as an image in the production of comparative-analytical discourse in ethnography today because of its multivalent polymorphy. It evokes a transgressive image because it provocatively implies the biological while in practice it has been deployed mostly by social constructionists from Mauss through Douglas and onwards. “Body” is an operator-word used to give a layered semblance of unity to our anthropological discourse because of its supposed (etic) universality.

Why “body”?

The body is suddenly omnipresent in academic texts. The momentum of academic fashion aside, the problematization of the body is undoubtedly linked to its increased visibility and objectification within late capitalist consumer society (Featherstone 1990; Turner 1995), to feminism and the rise of feminist theory (Bordo 1993), as well as to the body’s increased salience as primary signifier and locus of “home” for the uprooted, mobile, hybridized citizens of the transnational moment. Or perhaps the body is so visible now because its time is over, subject to takeover by an increasing array of technologies. Whatever the case, the new awareness of our bodies provides a useful departure for thinking about bodiliness and sociality elsewhere. However, to the degree that it is possible, we have to ensure that we do not simply rediscover or invert our own obsessions.

Within anthropology, this question, Why “body”?, has been posed, implicitly or explicitly, by many writers in the past few years, notably by Emily Martin (Martin 1987 [1992], 1994). One answer to the question, couched in terms of the history of theory, has been that “body” is a successor to “person” as a focus of interest (and some puzzlement) in our discipline (A. J. Strathern 1994). Why this succession should have occurred is not easy to say, other than by noting that there has been a strong reaction in both sociology and anthropology against mentalistic images and a powerful concern with mind/body holism issues (Lock 1993). A focus on “the body” perhaps also fits with a new materialism, disconnected from the more dogmatic side of Marxism but concerned with the domain of lived experience and the effects of the social realm on the human body. Such an emphasis easily blends further with a semiotic approach (the body as signifier), with an approach through the theory of ritual (the production by means of ritual of persons, the embodied experience of persons undergoing intense ritual processes), and with gender (the gendering of bodies and the relationship of gender to sexuality). Heuristically, therefore, “body” seems a handy term around which to organize various issues of contemporary interest in our subject.

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This, however, is not sufficient for purposes of comparative work. For these, the relationship between body and person needs to be spelled out. And for writers working within the traditions of European thought, this problem obviously intersects with the older question of the relationship between body and mind although the two questions are not in fact isomorphic. The *tertium quid* here is “embodiment,” which is supposed to obviate the issue of relationship by arguing that it encompasses both. Embodiment would thus be the term for a state or a process that results from the continuous interaction of body and mind or rather their conceptualization as elements in a larger unity, the body/mind manifold (Samuel 1990). Such a modeling of human life fits well enough with what is known of brain/body relationships, including those specifically that have to do with the interdependence of “the intellect” and “the emotions,” looking at these as cultural categories (Damasio 1994). Neuropeptides, for example, constantly carry messages back and forth between the brain and the rest of the body that influence states which we describe as emotional.

It is important for us as anthropologists to realize that this background in brain/body studies does provide us with a universal basis for discussing some of the problems that interest us, for example certain questions of sickness and health. The widespread cultural emphasis on the influence of emotional states on illness can be referred to the new universalistic picture of brain/body interactions. However, for our own enterprises, this is only a useful beginning. If we take the sphere of culture, experience, and sociality as our domain we enter arenas that demand a relativizing perspective. The relationship between body and person thus returns as an issue of cross-cultural analysis. And here it is as with so many of our own folk concepts that we try to employ as counters in comparativist discourse: the very categories themselves are hard to define prior to such analysis, since definitions would be the result of the analysis rather than its logical precursors.

In fact, then, our approach must be resolutely dialectical, focusing on the embodiment of persons and the personification of bodies and on the ways in which these processes are differentially highlighted in different places, indeed on how different moments of these ongoing processes become objectified and singled out for cultural attention, as core symbols, foci of power, vehicles of identity, or loci of struggle. A number of basic questions come to mind. How are particular bodily practices institutionalized? In what ways is bodily experience used to legitimate authority or to subvert or challenge it? How, in a practical sense, are differences between moral and jural personhood realized and what role does the body play in each (James 1989)? How does the body serve to substantiate and

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to symbolize not only gender, but personhood and relationship, connection and disconnection, dependence and independence, dividuality and individuality, hierarchy and autonomy? What, if any, are the limits of the body in these tasks?

Embracing the body, therefore, we nevertheless start with a healthy skepticism toward those arguments which romanticize the body or use it simply to invert older ideas. As Novack has recently remarked, the popular notion of the “responsive body” merely emphasizes the particular opposition between mind and body or reason and emotion characteristic of North American culture. Similarly, Corin in her chapter warns of recourse to highly culture-bound notions of “empathy” and “experience,” extending perhaps to “embodiment” itself. Before looking for “the body” elsewhere, we have to problematize our own local constructs, including the very opposition and its predictable sequelae, which are highly gendered (Lutz 1988; Bordo 1993). What de Coppet remarks for individualism holds equally well for the body (especially once we recognize that the body is often taken as the sign for the individual). He writes: “Those who hold individualism to be truth itself are inclined to believe that they proceed from a self-evident point of view. But this point of view is, to the contrary, sociologically determined, and, if this fact is not recognized, the object ‘society’ itself tends to vanish; nothing remains on either side of the act of observation but individuals in interrelation. We thus find ourselves in a situation in which humankind seems to contain only individual totalities” (de Coppet 1992).

Hence we need to start with a more critical and dialectical approach, one which problematizes the relationship between body and person or body and self in social context and which understands this as a problem for investigation simultaneously within our own thought and in the thought and practice of our subjects. As Novack says, “body must be understood as a constructed category susceptible to analysis, and it should be considered both from vantage points within the experiences of the actors in any given event and from the perspective(s) of the scholar” (1995:183). This is to suggest, however, not that we attempt to *disembody* the body (always a risk in intellectual work), considering it only at the conceptual level, but rather that we examine how cultural concepts impact on bodily experiences and practices and likewise how our embodied condition affects cultural concepts and social practices (cf. the criticisms of Foucault made by Turner 1995). At the same time we have to be aware of how recourse to the body so often serves as a means of naturalization, underpinning some otherwise questionable social construction or systematic inequality with intimations of inevitability, weightiness, and intimacy. Marshall Sahlins (1976a) has described the

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process with reference to the still flourishing field of sociobiology, now flanked by an energetic evolutionary psychology.

Our first set of chapters thus each tackle a number of stubborn oppositions head on, attempting, in LiPuma's words, to "relativize relativity." To begin with, there is Rita Astuti's reinstatement of an Africa/Melanesia contrast in terms of theories of the person and descent, followed by her own obviation of the contrast in terms of recognizing elements simultaneously present on both sides of the equation. Astuti here recapitulates on a broader front the pattern of micro-conclusions reached earlier by many of the contributors to the big-men/great-men volume on Melanesia edited by M. Godelier and M. Strathern (1991). More centrally, Astuti takes on the sex/gender contrast, effectively elaborating an argument as to why we cannot collapse them, even in a society such as the Vezo of Madagascar that places so little significance on sex as a form of difference. There will always be a tension, she argues, between what is viewed as fixed in the person and what is processual or transformable; where the boundary is conceived to lie will vary from society to society. In sharp contrast to some Melanesians, the Vezo do not make a distinction between male and female substances that compose a person and this has significant consequences for the kinds of agency and transformations possible or necessary in each place.

LiPuma provides a vigorous argument about the contrast between dividuality and individuality and in addition raises important questions about the transition to modernity and its implications for notions of the person. He argues that, as the individual is the locus of desire characteristic of modernity, in order to understand recent historical change in Melanesia we must clarify our conceptions of personhood. In particular, despite its tremendous usefulness in transcending common-sensical yet ethnocentric assumptions concerning personhood, and hence in understanding fundamental differences between Melanesian and Western sociality, we must now qualify the model of dividuality (M. Strathern 1988). Conversely, we have to recognize the ideological nature of individualism and the ways in which dividual aspects of Western personhood have been masked. As LiPuma suggests, a number of questions remain unanswered by this analysis. For one, to the degree that individuality is closely connected to capitalism, are all non-capitalist or pre-modern societies alike in their emphasis on dividuality? (A more lengthy examination of definitional and analytical issues involved here is given in A. J. Strathern and P. J. Stewart in press.)

Ellen Corin addresses a remarkably similar set of concerns from the Africanist side. She provides a salutary account of the consequences of Mauss's seminal essay on the person within the francophone literature

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and what the concept of “individuation” would mean in this context. Although the French Africanists were not operating with the jural notions of descent theory they nonetheless appear to have had a highly deterministic view of personhood, a social determinism that marks even the work of the psychoanalysts of the Dakar school. Corin seeks alternate principles, means, and contexts for individuation that exist alongside the dominant collective forms and facilitate some perspective on them. She finds one such locus of individuation in the therapeutic rituals of spirit possession in Zaire (now Congo) and explores in great depth and with great sensitivity the symbolic contexts in which the subjective experience of patients is gradually transformed over time from subjection to new and active forms of relationship. The picture is reminiscent of that delineated earlier by Janice Boddy on the northern Sudanese (Boddy 1989), but with an explicit psychoanalytic dimension to the argument. Hence, although Corin is undoubtedly correct in her contrast between American experiential and French structural emphases overall, it is noteworthy that in this particular case her own concerns are more psychological in comparison with LiPuma’s sociological or Boddy’s cultural account. At the same time, Corin is careful to specify that there is more than one form of individualism; for the adepts of the Zebola ritual, she writes, “the goal is not the creation of autonomous subjects” but rather a personal “re-positioning” within the collective order.

Each of these authors provides exceptionally lucid renditions of complex issues and debates. Moreover both Corin and LiPuma frame their arguments concerning the recognition of individuality with reference to the very conditions of anthropological knowledge. Similar questions are taken up in Lambek’s chapter as well as in the concluding section of this Introduction. Lambek argues controversially that mind and body represent fundamental incommensurables in human experience that are everywhere transcended in practice and yet everywhere distinguished, in some form or other, in thought. Culturally diverse formulations may themselves prove incommensurable with one another so that translations of words like “mind” or “esprit” or Melpa “noman” (discussed in Strathern and Stewart’s chapter) do not provide precise mappings of one another, nor could we discriminate which of them has it “right”; nevertheless they fall within the same horizon of ideas. It is important to recognize that LiPuma and Lambek differ somewhat in their understanding of incommensurability. For Lambek incommensurability does not preclude translation or comparison, but by the same token he does not expect ethnographically diverse material necessarily to fit into a single parsimonious, tidy, systematic, or overarching model. Hence while Lambek’s discussion of the mind/body problem has the same

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general ambition as LiPuma's analysis of opening new avenues of comparison, and the same general view that "relativity must be relative," there is an interesting tension between the ways the two projects are respectively established. Lambek's description of spirit mediumship, while less complete than Corin's or Knauff's, also provides a useful counterpoint to theirs in terms of the range of subjects possession can address.

Talk about bodies and persons raises many issues. One of the more critical concerns the historical position of self-reflective thought about bodies and minds, abstracted from concrete, embodied events and practices, and how we draw the contrast between the products of Western philosophy (including our own thought as anthropologists) and those of other traditions and technologies. What kinds of lines do we draw, and where? What kind of moral do we want to draw about our story of the "invention of philosophy" and the "discovery of the soul" by the Greeks, albeit in the face of post-modern claims regarding the end of metaphysics or the spuriousness of the subject? How do African and Melanesian traditions of thought and bodies of practice (whether or not influenced by the Greek tradition via Islam or Christianity) understand selfhood and process experience? Do they distinguish a "soul" from the "body" and in what manner? Or do they simply relate to the world mimetically rather than by abstracted reason? Is mimesis as bodily practice somehow inferior to pure mentation; is the body a kind of "epistemological deceiver" as Plato thought (Bordo 1993:3); or, in somehow unifying experience rather than splitting it along the lines of self-alienating Western dualism, is it superior? Lambek tries to clarify some of the issues involved in thinking anthropologically about mind/body issues, while Devisch's chapter on a Yaka healing cult in Congo (former Zaire) implicitly raises others in its striking account of a culture which, he says (somewhat controversially), "has barely evolved a cognitive technology of 're-presentation' or of distancing in relation to bodily experience and the habitus."

Since Mary Douglas anthropologists have appreciated the body for its symbolic properties. In any given society or regional tradition we can inquire which aspects of the body or sensory experience form the prime sources of metaphor; and of which metaphors the body is also the recipient. Which features of embodied existence are singled out as primary, as metonymic of the whole (Ruel 1997), which senses tend to metaphorize each other, and what chains of precedence are thereby set up (cf. Howes 1991)? What are the consequences of starting with one metaphor or direction of predication rather than another?

One of the most basic questions concerns the use of the body to discriminate the discrete bounded ("possessive") individual. This is a