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Source: *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 15, No. 4, Special Issue on Oral Poetry and Song (Winter, 1984), pp. 583-588

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3819351>

Accessed: 28-11-2025 11:42 UTC

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DEATH, CHAOS, AND HIGHLIFE SONGS: A REPLY

Sjaak van der Geest

I see culture as “an edifice erected in the face of the potent and alien forces of chaos.” Peter Berger (p. 33), from whom I borrow this trenchant line, is thinking of the cognitive aspects of culture: ideology, religion, but his words apply to every aspect of human culture, material and behavioral as well as cognitive and symbolic. All that human beings do, build, cultivate, think, or believe is an attempt to create a shelter, a place to live, in the midst of threatening chaos.

My presupposition is that human beings cannot stand chaos, that they crave order. The philosopher Susanne Langer (p. 287) writes that man “can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos.” Clifford Geertz, who quotes her at length in his seminal article on religion, expresses the same thought:

The strange opacity of certain empirical events, the dumb senselessness of intense or inexorable pain, and the enigmatic unaccountability of gross inequity all raise the uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps the world, and hence man’s life in the world, has no genuine order at all—no empirical regularity, no emotional form, no moral coherence. And the religious response to this suspicion is in each case the same: the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience. (p. 23)

The most paradoxical experience in human life is its ending, death. It is the greatest threat to the shelter of meaning which people have built themselves because death seems to deny the very essence of meaning. Death is chaos par excellence. Ultimately, therefore, one may regard culture as an edifice against death. Death as a physical event cannot be denied, but it can be denied in a more subtle way. As Geertz (p. 24) points out, it can be denied that it is an inexplicable event, that it is chaos. All over the world people have managed to cover up the dark emptiness of death. We have called it religion.

From this perspective, one would expect that songs, or any other cultural phenomenon, reflect this tendency of reinforcing security and keeping out chaos. Death in particular is likely to be explained away. Doing research on texts of highlife songs in Ghana, I expected the same “cover-up.” To my surprise, I found

the opposite. As I pointed out some time ago (Van der Geest, p. 169), "Death is depicted as a gruesome reality, from which no one can escape and from which no one returns." This discovery clashed with my "anthropological axiom" and needed investigation. My—admittedly rather tentative—explanation was that death is "forgotten" by facing its stark physical reality to the extreme. I spoke of "drunkenness, hallucination and emotional exhaustion" (p. 169). I thought it was clear that not only were these words to be taken in their literal sense but also that they meant that the full awareness of death has a paralyzing effect on people and thus blocks further confrontation with the ultimate chaos. Of course, excessive drinking does take place, and although Yankah rightly remarks that it is frowned upon, at funerals it is condoned to a considerable extent. There, one can even state, it is sometimes even prescribed. Like weeping, drinking may be regarded as a sign of love for the deceased and an expression of deep sorrow. The one who does not drink may give the impression of not having loved the dead. Worse, he may be suspected of being responsible for his death!

I went a step further and raised the question: why do traditional songs emphasize order, continuity through death? And why do popular songs as highlife stress disorder? I suggested (p. 147) that popular songs present a truer picture of popular beliefs about death than traditional songs do. What do I mean by "present a picture"? Or, to take this maltreated term, also used by Yankah in the title of his essay, what does *reflection* mean?

In an important methodological article on the sociology of literature, the Dutch sociologist Johan Goudsblom (p. 8), inspired by Norbert Elias, writes that the relation between the world of literary imagination and the world of daily experience is not simply reflection in the sense of mirroring what is. Neither is it a reflection which has been decorated by the author's phantasy. Goudsblom views literary imagination as a continuation, an extension of the world of human experience. Literature is human experience. This continuation can take many different forms; it can indeed be a reflection of the visible social world, but it can also be a reflection, an expression of what people wish, fear, or dream.¹

My remark, that popular songs are a "true picture" of what people believe about death, can perhaps best be understood as what people *fear* about death. Yankah's comments suggest that "belief" in my article stands for an unequivocal cognitive activity, almost like knowledge. I want to emphasize that religious belief, particularly belief about death, can be full of ambiguity and con-

tradition. I most certainly reject, with Yankah, that there exists in Akan society a general agreement about death and life hereafter. Expressions of a belief in life after death occur alongside expressions of the opposite. Hope for a continuation of life coincides with fear that death is the end. It is therefore no wonder that both extremes appear also in highlife songs. I gave two highlife examples of expressing belief in life after death in my postscript (p. 174) and am grateful to Yankah for providing still other examples.

The fact remains, however, that traditional songs, and more generally traditional culture, tend to emphasize order (life continues, life has meaning), whereas popular songs often allow disorder to take over. The question remains: why should this be so? Yankah suggests that the answer must be sought in the artist's individual style:

A performer may rely on the shock or antinormative value of a message to win the appreciation of the audience. Thus, for artistic reasons, he may defeat the expectation of the audience through the juxtaposition of the sacred and the banal.

But why should this be a *shock*, and why should he win *appreciation* of the audience? The artist's words are shocking because they pronounce what has been most effectively suppressed and what people fear most: that death is death. He wins their appreciation because they recognize their deepest fear in his song. It touches them deeply because it reflects their fear. Referring to personal style only makes sense when it is linked to a wider social context.

For the third time, the question presents itself: why do highlife songs, and not traditional ones, convey such a shocking message? For the answer, I must return to my starting point, that culture is an edifice against chaos. Culture, and ideology in particular, has two important functions, metaphysical and sociopolitical. The metaphysical function is that everything in life, both the cosmic and the cultural world, is given a meaning. The sociopolitical function is that the metaphysical explanation legitimizes the existing social order. Various authors have, for various societies, pointed out that the existing social order is even depicted as a reflection of the cosmic order. The structure of social and political relationships undergoes a process of "cosmization."² An encroachment on the metaphysical order, therefore, jeopardizes also the social order. This thought is beautifully expressed in Brecht's drama *Galileo*. Galileo's reversal of the cosmic order is felt to endanger the ex-

isting social and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Another example, closer to our topic of discussion, is the belief in ancestors. An infringement on this belief constitutes also an infringement on the political power of the elders who legitimize their social position to a large extent through the ancestors. John Middleton's study of Lugbara religion provides some striking examples of this phenomenon.

From this perspective it becomes understandable that traditional songs repeat the mythical charter and that popular artists, with fewer vested interests in the existing order, are more inclined to shake the established beliefs in the order of things.³ Yankah misreads my article if he thinks that I tend to the conclusion that the traditional Akan wisdom about life hereafter is a hoax. I do not claim a standpoint outside history from where truth and illusion comfortably can be established. My presupposition that human beings build "dikes" (again Berger, p. 51) against chaos should not be taken to mean that in *reality* everything is chaos. My own involvement as a human being renders a "last judgment" impossible; the "final truth" remains elusive, for the Akan peasant as well as for the anthropologist visiting him, even for the theologian preaching to him. *If* Yankah wants me to choose from his three possible conclusions, I will select the third, of course: the discrepancy between traditional Akan beliefs about death and beliefs expressed in highlife songs asks for investigation. In this brief note I have tried to contribute to such an investigation, I hope more clearly than in my first attempt.

Two minor remarks remain to be made. Yankah's reference to Rattray's work among the Akan provides a powerful support for my own hypothesis concerning the contrast between traditional songs and highlife. Rattray's conclusions about Akan beliefs may have been based on practical fieldwork, as Yankah rightly notes; significant is that Rattray's interest was heavily biased toward the traditional elite. He tells us more about life at the chief's court than about "ordinary life." In a recent thesis about Akan women, Pieter Teepe (p. 20) remarks that Rattray hardly mentions the division of labor between men and women, or agriculture which then constituted the most important source of life. As we have seen, moving with the elite is not likely to result in the collection of ideas which impair the established belief in the order of things. He who wants to know more about religious insecurity and metaphysical doubts should not interview bishops.

There is no need to caution me against overrating the ethnographic potential of popular songs. Yankah has apparently overlooked my statement that I regard the study of literature as *com-*

plementary to direct fieldwork (p. 146). My interpretation of highlife texts was carried out in conjunction with extensive fieldwork (four and one-half years) in Ghana. I cannot count the number of funerals I have attended. As a matter of fact, I am probably as suspicious of exclusive literature research as Yankah himself.

I started off my reply with a reference to the important work of Peter Berger. In another study Berger and his coauthor Luckman define man as a "world constructor." By constructing reality, man produces meaning to his life. The same process, in miniature, takes place in Yankah's critique of my article. He constructed his own version of my argument to come to grips with his own view.

On the whole, however, I am grateful that he took pains to brood over my argument and criticize it. His critique has helped me to arrive at a clearer insight into some exciting questions, in Akan society as well as in my own.

NOTES

I want to acknowledge my gratefulness to Kwasi Asante-Darko and many other Ghanaian friends who helped me to understand both Ghanaian *high* life and *ordinary* life.

1. Unfortunately, Goudsblom's article is only available in Dutch. The exact quotation goes:

In het sociogenetisch perspectief staat de romanwereld niet los van de dagelijkse ervaringswereld, en is daarvan evenmin een getrouwe, zij het door fantasie versierde en vertekende afspiegeling; de romanwereld wordt nu gezien als een "voortzetting van de ervaringswereld", een voortzetting die allerlei vormen kan aannemen: van voorbeeld, wensbeeld, schrikbeeld of droombeeld. (Goudsblom, p. 8)

2. The term "cosmization" is used by Berger (p. 120) but was coined by Eliade (cf. also Marx's concept of "celestialization").

3. But where artists do have vested interests, they suddenly appear bent to conservatism and picture the traditional order of things as the normal order. This happens, for example, when high-life singers (almost invariably men) describe relationships between men and women (cf. Asante-Darko and Van der Geest, 1983).

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