

**The Land as Body: An Essay on the Interpretation of Ritual among the
Manjaks of Guinea-Bissau**



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The Land As Body: An Essay on the Interpretation of Ritual Among the Manjaks of Guinea-Bissau

Although neo-Marxism informed the author's fieldwork on the therapeutic effectiveness of rituals among the Manjaks of northwestern Guinea-Bissau, the explanatory value of materialist models turned out to be limited. Far from collapsing under the impact of capitalism because of migrant labor to Senegal and France, Manjak society retains an intact symbolic order. Migrants continue to interpret their physical and mental disorders in local terms and to participate in expensive rituals that absorb their capitalist earnings. Thus they submit to the gerontocratic order, restoring their roots in a cosmology in which the orificeless Perfect Body is ultimately the ancestral land itself. Spatio-temporal belonging, filiation, domestic kinship power, and bodily functions merge, influencing many aspects of illness behavior and its expression in ritual and everyday life. Neo-Marxism, epistemologically linked to societies under capitalism, scarcely explains this repertoire of symbols, yet helps us to pinpoint its unexpected vitality.

Relations between the symbolic order and the political economy of any social formation are unmistakable and often throw an interesting light upon the specific structure and dynamics of the symbolic order. But the potential of such analysis is soon spent, and after initial illumination it turns out that fundamental research questions remain unanswered (if they do not become obscured and misdirected). The reasons that made some of us adopt a political-economy approach in the first place remain valid (van Binsbergen 1984a). These reasons do not lie primarily in the market incentives to theoretical innovation (contrary to Droogers 1985), but in the following considerations which together epitomize the current neo-Marxist inspiration.

1. Philosophical idealism, which under the impact of Durkheim has dominated social anthropology in general and religious anthropology in particular for almost a century, has been rejected. In addition, claims that cultural and symbolic phenomena have an independent dynamic or are *sui generis* have been repudiated.

2. Neo-Marxists attempt to share, albeit vicariously in the form of scholarship, in significant forms of protest and struggle (between classes, ethnic groups, generations, sexes; against state, colonial, and/or racial oppression) in the present or the past by adopting the cause of subordinate groups. Once we have understood

that oppression always has roots in the political economy, our good intentions might easily lead us to concentrate entirely on those roots alone, projecting a political economy of exploitation and oppression onto any situation involving any of the social groups listed above and materialistically assuming the primacy of that political economy over whatever symbolic or ideological expressions pertain to that social group. Ultimately the relative powerlessness of our social-scientific academic production in North Atlantic society may contribute greatly to our vicarious desire to liberate distant peoples—if only on paper.

3. In the prolonged struggle between cultural imperialism (as propounded by North Atlantic society since the 19th century) and cultural relativism (the main stock-in-trade of classic anthropology), neo-Marxism has proposed new answers. The neo-Marxist position has helped us to understand how the logic of capitalism (mediated through bureaucratic formal organizations) is one of the major structural implications and conditions of cultural imperialism, although we do not yet fully understand the place of anthropological intellectual production in this structure (van Binsbergen 1984a and references cited therein).

More important, the paradigm of the articulation of modes of production—one of the major contributions of neo-Marxism—has allowed us to see a limited number of broad patterns of structural correspondences cutting across the dazzling multiplicity of cultures. Moreover, these patterns have been recognized as anchored in a few basic forms of exploitative relations of production that have repeated themselves in time and space: exploitation of women by men, of youths by elders, of villages by unproductive aristocrats or royal courts, of labor by capital. The assumption that each of these basic forms of exploitative relationship (each of these *modes of production*) represents a unique logic of its own, expressed in recognizable and repetitive economic, social, political, and ideological forms (however superficially different), enables us to view the manifold contradictions that characterize all social formations (particularly those of the modern world) as the dynamic interplay between modes of production seeking to impose hegemony over other modes in the same social formation.

Between Materialist and Idealist Anthropology

Our understanding of the capitalist mode of production—its logic of commoditization and the contradictions it generates in contact with other modes—has reached considerable maturation (after all, it is the mode of production that has produced, somewhat antithetically, our own discipline and has largely dictated the patterns of our personal lives). The problem is that our appreciation of other modes of production and their logics within the same materialist framework is still very tentative, exploratory, and intuitive. What stores of knowledge anthropology has built up about other modes of production are cast largely in a non-Marxist, idealist idiom. Despite individual attempts (e.g., Baré 1977; Houtart and Lemer-cinier 1977; Raatgever 1988; van Binsbergen 1981b), we have not yet set out systematically to recode this knowledge in a neo-Marxist framework. Perhaps we may never succeed in doing so entirely, because of the constraints of our capitalist life world. As a result, classic and neo-Marxist anthropology continue to constitute largely separate realms of meaning and explanation, sometimes at dagger point, often simply incapable of relating to one another and of illuminating one

another's analyses. The awareness of a vast, occasionally rich, profound, and beautiful edifice of classic description, analysis, and theory leaves the neo-Marxist anthropologist uneasy about the abstraction, generality, and superficiality of his own tentative approach. Yet one hesitates to trade the bad conscience this generates for the false consciousness an idealist classic approach would constitute.¹

The relevance, heuristic potential, and illuminating power of the neo-Marxist position has been demonstrated time and again, particularly with regard to the analysis of the innumerable social situations in the contemporary Third World that are characterized by peripheral capitalism. In the specific field of medical anthropology, many contemporary topics bear witness to the relevance of a neo-Marxist perspective: the ubiquitous commoditization of health care, along with the commoditization of the overall productive and consumptive experience of its Third World users; the increasing dominance of formal bureaucratic organizations in the medical domain, partly through the impact of the colonial and post-colonial state (the logic of which cannot be understood except by reference to capitalism) and partly because bureaucracy is the organizational form in which First World capital structures the production and marketing of pharmaceutical and other health commodities; the emergence of the medical domain as a separate identifiable sector in peripheral Third World societies; the effects of these processes on indigenous healers, who exchange time-honored local forms of practice for innovations mimicking the cosmopolitan doctor's office, bedside manner, techniques, remuneration, and professionalization.

Yet this heuristic success of neo-Marxism should scarcely surprise us: of course an approach that started out as an analysis of capitalism in the first place should be capable of gauging the impact of peripheral capitalism in a selected social domain such as medicine. Our analytical problems, as medical anthropologists seeking to apply a neo-Marxist paradigm, really begin when we turn to historical societies that predated capitalism or to contemporary societies where, for one reason or another, the inroads of the capitalist mode of production have been slight, ineffective, or blocked. Is a neo-Marxist approach capable of analyzing societies without capitalism? Or is neo-Marxism only an epistemological echo of the capitalist ideological make-up of North Atlantic society, capable only of discerning whatever is fundamentally, ontologically kindred to it? Having explored elsewhere the amazing impenetrability of Manjak society to capitalist encroachment (van Binsbergen 1984b, 1988), the Manjak health system to be discussed in this article represents a promising test case for these questions.

Neo-Marxist materialism formed the context of my recent research among the Manjak in northwestern Guinea-Bissau. That country's liberation struggle has had great symbolic and emotional value for radical North Atlantic academics ever since Basil Davidson (1981[1969]) adopted it; for better or worse, it still stands as a creation of one of Africa's main radical theoreticians, Amílcar Cabral. When the Bissau Ministry of Health needed anthropological information on the psychotherapeutic potential of local, noncosmopolitan healers, the request appealed to me not only because it offered the opportunity for an inside view of and a personal contribution to that country, but also because it would force me to confront my theoretical views with new fieldwork in which symbolic phenomena and their practical effects on people's lives would be so central that I could not easily take refuge in some superficial political-economy generalizations but would have to

look for neo-Marxist interpretations as rich and profound as the best classical anthropology.

The Research Setting

Research took place in the Manjak area, where autochthonous cults are still immensely powerful and where the world religions (Christianity and Islam) have penetrated only superficially. In some respects this was the most intensive and “direct” fieldwork of my career. For the first time I worked without an interpreter during most of my research, and I did not have my own household but stayed with a local family, whose head was a senior Land priest. Even with all this rapport, a free flow of information was checked by the extreme secretiveness of the Manjak. Within the villages and their various constituent wards, I could readily participate in ongoing social processes and in collective ancestral and other rituals at the multitude of local shrines (Figure 1).

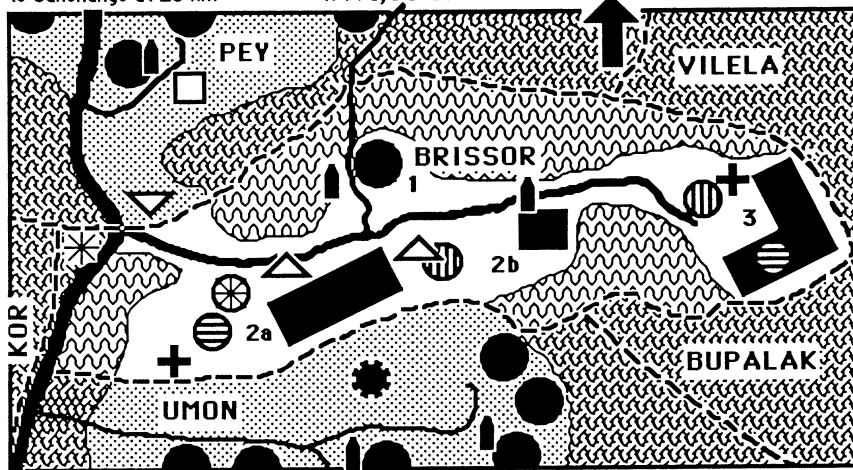
However, the Sacred Grove just outside the village (center of the Land cult and of adult male ritual and social life in general) remained closed to me. Only sporadically could I accompany individuals when their personal quests for healing and good fortune led them to *napene* priests, who are officiants of a cultic complex loosely associated with the Land cult. Along with the Land shrines, many *napene* oracular shrines (*pubol*) were also found all over the villages. It was mainly as a client or patient myself that I managed to gain frequent access to the rituals of the *pubol* and of the region’s most important cult, that of Mama Jombo in Coboiana, a distance of about 50 km. In doing so, I merely followed in the footsteps of the many Portuguese and Senegalese strangers whom these shrines have accommodated over the years.

After fieldwork in Tunisia and both urban and rural Zambia, the Manjak situation was my first personal experience not only with an African society where the flow of information was so utterly restricted and privacy so highly valued, but also with a viable gerontocracy that had successfully withstood the eroding effects of both capitalism and the modern state. The latter aspect I found difficult to appreciate. In day-to-day interaction it was brought home to me that I did not qualify as an elder (in a society where age and age differences formed a constant obsession for the participants, and even men in their 60s still recognized their junior status vis-à-vis the “real” elders, their seniors). In addition, I was constantly reminded of the fact that as a non-initiate my status was much lower even than that of my local age-mates. But beyond this personal experience (touched by my own position as a son, father, and senior academician in Dutch society), there was the neo-Marxist paradigm, which had taught me to consider the relation between elders and junior members of society (both women and young men) as essentially exploitative (Meillassoux 1975; Rey 1971, 1973, 1979; van Binsbergen and Geschiere 1985). Was not such exploitation the pivot on which the “domestic” mode of production hinged?

Instead of the post-revolutionary society I had been prepared for and with which I might easily have identified—one where young people had come to formulate a new and inspiring social order—I found myself in an unexpectedly archaic social order fully dominated by elders. The proceeds of the region’s massive and prolonged labor migration to Senegal and France seemed mainly to be controlled and appropriated by elders, not so much in the form of bridewealth or other

to Praça at 250 m;
to 'harbour' at 1000 m
to Canchungo at 25 km

to Praça at 200 m.



to other wards, village *benii*
and Sacred Grove

LEGEND

- | | | | | | |
|---------|--|-----|----------------|--|-------------------|
| | village path | | compound path | | ward boundary |
| | other wards | | trees | | ruin |
| | well | | kitchen hut | | cattle pen |
| | bathroom hut | PEY | name of ward | | open toilet place |
| | dwellings (rectangular: modern, iron-roofed; round: traditional, thatched) | | | | |
| 1, 2, 3 | distinct compounds (compound 2 consists of the larger men's house and the smaller women's house) | | | | |
| | a collection of ancestral shrines | | deity's shrine | | oracle hut |
| | <i>benii</i> (assembly place) belonging to the Pey ward (with shrine and cemetery) | | | | |

the Praça is the village cluster's market place, where also the modern clinic is situated

0 10 meter

FIGURE 1

Diagram of local shrines in area of research.

local capital investments (as is common elsewhere in Africa) but in the form of relatively expensive ritual offerings of rum and animal sacrifices. These were imposed by elder cult leaders, and after the Land had its libatory share, largely consumed by these elders. Contrary to current insights, migrants' participation in the capitalist mode of production did not seem to serve the reproduction of that mode,

but of the local modes of production under gerontocratic control (van Binsbergen 1984b, 1988). From this tentative analysis I proceeded to develop my research plan for investigating the therapeutic effectiveness of the various cults in which Manjak participants, including migrants, were involved.

Manjak Rituals and Their Effectiveness

One of the striking features of Manjak rituals (which are invariably prompted by illness) is their lack of dramaturgical and symbolic elaboration.² The rituals have a low degree of formality and lack a dramaturgy of tension and relief. They are usually limited to a few minutes of pouring, drinking, sacrificing, praying briefly and incoherently, and more drinking, after which a hasty retreat to productive activities in the paddy field or cashew and palm groves follows. This applies to most ancestral and Land ritual. Only the most important ancestral ritual (the erection of a shrine for a deceased kinsman, a relatively infrequent occurrence for reasons of human demography) may be more elaborate in involving the monotonous drumming of praises on talking drums and a collective meal or drink shared with neighboring wards and villages. Commensality is also an aspect of the occasional rituals staged by priestly and other occupational guilds.

Despite the very considerable amount of alcohol consumed at these rituals, they are invariably very sober, simple, matter-of-fact, and direct. Concern and tension entirely concentrate on the material requirements that must be met even before a ritual can be staged. Celebrants, especially returning migrants, rush up and down the all-weather road to the market town of Canchungo for ever more rum and animals in order to discharge the constantly increasing ritual obligations imposed by the divining and officiating elders, against whom they have no appeal. They spend a fortune (an estimated 50% to 100% of their accumulated savings from migrant labor), yet do not seem to enjoy the process in the least. Nor do they appear to derive any catharsis from it, at least not such as could be observed in my day-to-day contact with them. On the contrary, what did come across was their mounting state of stress when confronted with their powerlessness in the face of the officiants' demands, with their own dwindling resources in terms of time or money, and with the fact that the post-revolutionary Guinea-Bissau economy often makes it impossible to find a taxi or to buy sacrificial items, even if the money is available.

I tended to interpret these rituals as primarily the financial and symbolic submission of women and young men to their elders, both as officiants and as representatives of the supernatural agents venerated in the cults, who were thought of as being just as demanding and forbidding as the elders (after whom they would appear to be shaped). How could such submission ever be healthy? I was prepared to accept that when elders were both officiants and clients/sponsors in these rituals, the result might benefit them emotionally and spiritually, reinforcing the gerontocratic dominance they were also enjoying outside the ritual sphere. But I tended to deny all therapeutic effect when women and young men, at the hands of elders who already dominated their non-ritual life, experienced this domination yet again in a cultic setting. The cost of ritual participation, and the clients' lack of enthusiasm in the religious sense of that word (i.e., divine rapture), all seemed to corroborate such a conclusion.

I was, however, prepared to make an exception for the *napene* cultic complex. Clearly it was loosely associated with the Land cult, even though no ritual could take place at the *pubol* that was not immediately complemented by a similar offering at the Sacred Grove. The *pubol*, thick-walled, dark, secluded, equipped with libation basins and crammed with paraphernalia (shells, horns, animal skulls), was of a very different construction from the Land shrines outside and inside the Sacred Grove, which were miniature thatched huts without walls or other specific features or paraphernalia. The *pubol* officiants were specialist ritual entrepreneurs who had no ex officio status either in their wards of residence or in the Land cult. From my own experience as a client of *pubol* rituals of divination and healing, I can attest that, even across cultural and linguistic boundaries, these were intimate, full of subtle dramaturgical and symbolic effects, and unmistakably cathartic.

Obviously, however, neither a fieldworker's esthetic appreciation, nor his projection of personal or theoretical views as to what constitutes a pleasant sort of society, nor even his personal existential experiences with divination and healing provide sufficient clues to approach that crucial but ill-studied aspect of African religion, therapeutic effectiveness. What is needed is an assessment of occurrences of physical and spiritual disorder in an attempt to trace the structural conditions under which people had fallen ill, the various local and cosmopolitan therapies they had pursued, and the outcome of these efforts in the short and long term. To achieve these goals, I studied symbolism and practices concerning the body, illness, and healing, mainly through general observation and participation in my host family, both in the village and at the local dispensary of cosmopolitan medicine. My psychiatric colleague in this project enabled us to conduct in-depth, diagnostic interviews and observations as well.

Not surprisingly, in the West African context the Western distinction between somatic and psychic disorder was found to have no local equivalent. Instead, all forms of discomfort and misfortune were interpreted (at least on one level of discourse) as affliction by supernatural agents. Every person afflicted was supposed to have ritual obligations toward such agents, who might be deceased kinsmen, minor land spirits, the Land itself, or the *pubol* healing spirits. Some ancestral obligations were inherited by birth, while others stemmed from any number of contracts that the patient himself or a kinsman acting on his behalf had once entered into with those agents. Humans would always be behind in fulfilling their part of the bargain (i.e., paying for and staging expensive sacrifices), and illness was a sign that the agent was becoming impatient. This etiological system was applied to virtually all serious complaints, usually in peaceful coexistence with cosmopolitan medicine as administered at home, at the migrants' distant places of work, or in the regional and national centers of Canchungo and Bissau.

This nonspecific etiology could initially be studied using whatever complaint my main informants happened to experience. However, since the project's emphasis was on therapeutic effectiveness in cases of mental disorder only, I collected and analyzed, together with a Western-trained psychiatrist with several years of clinical experience in Guinea-Bissau, those cases we could find of what, by any cosmopolitan or transcultural-psychiatric standards, would have to be considered grave mental disorder. In a population of about 90,000 Manjaks today,

severe mental cases turned out to be rather rare. Some of our best-studied ones are listed in Table 1.

Far from corroborating my initial hypotheses about the onerousness and stressfulness of local rituals, this material suggests that contemporary Manjak society, however much it may be considered a backward labor reserve in the capitalist world system, is characterized by a remarkably wholesome balance between its internal symbolic and authority structure and its relations with the outside world. Combining migrancy with very strong and persisting ritual ties with home appears to prevent, rather than generate, insanity. Incipient mental problems appear to be redressed and corrected at an early stage, invariably by invoking a combination of local rituals that always includes the cult of the Land. The data strongly suggest the therapeutic effectiveness of this ritual complex. Severe mental distress seems to occur or at least to persist primarily in cases in which the patient is fundamentally incapable of communicating effectively with the cult of the Land as mediated by the elders.

I would submit that here we have uncovered the mainstay of Manjak medical culture. Blockage that appears to lead to persisting mental distress always involves factors external to Manjak society, and in most cases appears to consist in the disruption of the balance between symbolic rootedness in Manjak society and economic participation in the outside world. Typically this participation in cases of therapeutic failure involves prolonged employment in bureaucratic formal organizations, often in distant urban areas under a capitalist mode of production (cf. Collomb and Diop 1969; Diarra 1966). Manjaks fall mentally ill if outside society takes excessive control at the expense of ties with home, with Manjak culture, and with the central symbolic role of the elders.

The following example appears to bring out the essence of the therapeutic role of elders in Manjak society.

In her mother's compound Ndisia,³ a young woman of the Ucacenem ward, awaited her migrant husband's annual return from Senegal. Alarmed by a series of earlier sudden infant deaths in the family, she panicked at the first signs of fever and apathy in her two-year-old son Antonio, whom she was still breastfeeding. Without delay she reached for the most powerful healing strategy that Manjak culture provides: she took Antonio to the house of the village's most senior Land priest, Fernando, to whom her family was not related and whose ward (called Brissor) was in a different part of the village. Ndisia was given a room in the priest's men's house⁴ and stayed for over a week, until her son showed definite signs of improvement. The old man did not have to treat the child explicitly: his personal, invisible emanations as an elder were considered to be eminently effective. Through this action, Antonio also gained lifelong honorary membership in the elder's ward, which even involved rights of libation in the ward's ancestral shrines (which are generally guarded assiduously and disputed). Such "therapeutic adoption," which does not affect the patient's rights in his own ward of origin, is the only way in which libation rights can pass on to non-kin. In the neighboring Vilela ward two young adult women had once gained similar rights under similar circumstances, and they regularly shared in the collective rituals of the Brissor ward.

Part of the underlying model is not difficult to reconstruct: illness is seen as uprootedness, as a disrupted relationship between the person and the Land, and when the social and genealogical aspects of this condition are redressed through

TABLE 1
Some severe mental cases among contemporary Manjaks.

	Patients				
	Fernando	Carlos	Arguetta	Bajudessa	Politia
Sex	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
Year of birth	1918	1953	1942	1957	1967
Year complaint began	1983	1972	1980	1982	1981
Residence	Is family head	With F	With MZS	With paternal kin	With F
Complaint (provisional)	Psychotic	Chronic schizophrenia	Hysteria	Extreme apathy	Psychotic
Anamnesis	Ex-napene, junior partner took over practice; now involved in modern Basic Medical Care project	War separation from M; extreme mobility, aspirations imposed by F; rejected by colonial patron when schooling in capital; still sexually assaults FW	When a child, placed by F in household of M's ideal marriage partner; forced by F to marry non-Manjak in distant region of Guinea-Bissau; H and D died subsequently	Improper marriage; accompanied migrant H to France; H long imprisoned there on criminal charges; H failed to live up to kinship obligations vis-à-vis both consanguine and affinal kin at home	F traditional "king," demoted in Independence struggle; extreme status loss in family of orientation; patient could not stand humiliation by schoolmates
Received cultic treatment	+	+	+	+	+
Received cosmopolitan psychiatric treatment	+	+	+	+	+

fictive reaffiliation, the link with the Land is restored and improved. The Land's life-giving force, as mediated by the elder, once more flows freely to the patient.

All this does not sound particularly original. If the Manjak socio-ritual system had been consciously engineered by an anthropologist familiar with the classic work of Fortes (1969a[1945], 1969b[1949]), one would hardly have noticed the difference. The most idealist, culture-centered symbolic analysis might have arrived at the same sort of conclusion in terms of a wholesome communion with the essence of a culture. Personally, I would have distrusted it for that very reason, had not my detour along a materialist approach given me plenty of opportunity to arrive at a less mainstream and more materialist interpretation.

The Land As Body

Trading a materialist interpretation for a more symbolic one does not reveal to us the underlying mechanism that may be said to govern the link between the individual, on the one hand, and the socio-ritual structure on the other. The next question to be asked, therefore, is what, in the symbolic and/or material structure of Manjak society, allows rituals controlled by senior men to have such a strong impact on both mind and body? I believe that the answer can be given, and that it lies not in the sort of material structures that a political-economy approach would reveal, but in the amazingly consistent Manjak system of symbolism of the body. This system posits a parallelism reminiscent of various idealist philosophical systems in the European tradition (Plotinus, Leibnitz), in which the body is conceived as the world in microcosm or, in the Manjak case, the Land in microcosm.

When I tried to formulate Manjak notions of bodily and sensory functioning and experience in health and disease, I was at first struck by an extreme rigidity and reticence, which reminded me much more of peasant culture in North Africa and civil society in Europe than of any black African traits that I expected on the basis of personal fieldwork in Zambia, other ethnographic studies, or current North Atlantic and *négritude* stereotypes of "the" exuberant, utterly corporeal, rhythmic, and sensuous "African." Among Manjaks, it was as if everything that could be socially and physiologically functional and stimulating about the human body had become very highly restricted. With the exception of children (up to non-initiated young adults), Manjak villagers would hardly touch each other and would perform their digestive and sexual bodily functions in the greatest secrecy, so that not even the merest suggestion of these needs or drives would enter into public life and conversation. With averted gaze people would engage in a series of monologues rather than in dialogues; this would be true particularly of the interactions between members of different generations, but even age-mates would tend to fall into this pattern. The meagerly developed cuisine was meant to fill the stomach but hardly to cultivate (by means of food exchanges, festivals, or commensality) social relations beyond the extended family. The local music's simple structure was wholly subservient to the abstract requirements of the talking drums. Representational arts appeared to be absent, except the extremely stylized cylindrical wooden sculptures that, as images of the deceased, featured in ancestral shrines. The most beautiful items their culture produced—band-woven cloths of intricate, abstract, multicolored designs—were not meant to be worn, but to

be hoarded in chests until the owner, at his or her dying day, would be sown into them and thus committed to the grave. That is, they were displayed only for a few minutes at the time that marks the culmination of a human being's life, the time of his or her most intimate and consummative communion with the Land—burial.

While these few and disconnected impressions may suffice to indicate the general atmosphere of everyday life, in illness behavior a similar pattern seemed to be at work. Illness had to be denied, dissimulated, or repressed, both by the patient and by his or her social circle. Patients could claim no dispensation from daily chores around the house nor from the immensely heavy productive activities in the paddy fields. The sickbed was always a burden and never a relief. As a result, people were inclined to give in to their "weaknesses" only occasionally, with very little social recognition in the way of nursing, special privileges, and so on, and then only for an amazingly short time. Publicly acknowledged illness was a state measured in hours rather than weeks or months.

In a society so prone to migrancy to capitalist places of work, a materialist anthropologist would be tempted to explore the extent to which this rather unexpected pattern might be attributed partly to the internalization of the ideology of capitalism. Had not extreme commoditization and exploitative labor conditions under intensive capitalism produced somewhat similar notions of the human body and its "uses" in the official codes of formal bureaucratic organizations, in employers' dreams, and in the health standards applied by their companies' doctors?

Further research and reflection, however, convinced me that such an interpretation is spurious. Manjak bodily symbolism is not in any sense a product of capitalist encroachment, but, on the contrary, is another manifestation of an all-pervasive, integrated cosmological system that *protects* its bearers from the alienation inherent in the peripheral capitalist experience.

To project current, enlightened notions of North Atlantic culture would at first make the human body of Manjak culture appear extremely constrained, denied, and repressed. But when we go through the psychiatric case material, we find very few indications of such repression in the mental symptoms of patients. Instead, the fundamental underlying notion seems to be that of the Perfect Body, which is whole and fertile, closed unto itself to such an extent that it no longer has orifices that necessitate the passing of external substances from outside to inside and vice versa, and by virtue of this perfection, places itself outside the chain of human and social exchange, dependence, and manipulation, and at the apex of filiation. Mental distress means separation from the Perfect Body; mental health means emulating that Perfect Body and anxiously but wholeheartedly concealing the extent to which one's one physical body reflects that ideal only imperfectly.

Among the living, the male elder comes closest to this ideal. Although he may not be beyond the consumption of food and drink, his eating and drinking are largely confined to the inner recesses of the house and the Sacred Grove, shielded from the common gaze. His bodily needs are thus denied, and he cannot allow himself to be ill. If still involved in chains of social and bodily exchange, it is others who need to receive from him (rice, cattle, sperm, healing, etc.), and never the other way around. His being is whole and closed, closed also from the stream of information and gossip; Manjak secretiveness perfectly fits this model. His body is almost exalted above its human limitations, and so long as no publicly

witnessed passage across orifices occurs, he can be allowed to be fully displayed in a mere loincloth.

Young men, women, and children are way beneath this ideal and therefore may indulge, in varying degrees, in all the imperfections of the human and social condition: they may devour, defecate, fornicate, receive, beg, steal, adorn themselves, disclose secrets, and so on.

One step above the elder is the ancestor, so close to the Ideal Body that he or she may be represented in the ancestral shrine by a mere short, featureless stick protruding from the ground. Although locally recognized as an anthropomorphic image, not even facial openings are cut, and only a slight suggestion is given of a neck or a reclining shoulderline. Even more so than an elder, the ancestor is outside the chain of exchange, can no longer ask, and need not ask, since his living descendants are supposed to do everything they can to anticipate his desires and fulfill their obligations (hence their embarrassment and shame when illness publicly reveals that they have failed to do so).

The Ultimate Body that incarnates this system of symbolism and carries it to its final consequence is Land itself. As the universal source of life, in the material sense of rice and palm wine, it may give,⁵ but it cannot be allowed to receive. Humans may try to impose upon Land with their gifts (when pouring alcoholic drinks and animal blood) and with their dead bodies (which are buried in the Land), but Land has no orifices through which to receive. Its shrines are inconspicuous, without elaboration. They may be marked by a shrub or a piece of tree trunk but are often just a totally unmarked spot. They particularly lack formal libation basins, the equivalents of bodily orifices. Moreover, graves can only be dug by senior Land priests, who force ordinary mourners to look chastely away when the body (already rendered orificeless in its thick, mummy-shaped layer of cloths) is lowered into the ground and who attempt to conceal the exact location of a grave through digging secret underground extensions.

To an amazing extent and degree of detail, both the ritual and the medical system of the Manjaks can be subsumed under the formula of the orificeless Perfect Body. Without exaggeration, the human body can be said to be the dominant symbol in Manjak culture, and it has been applied and transformed in such a consistent way as to surpass and surmount everything corporeal. Of course the relationships involved are not always those of direct transposition. For instance, in many aspects of Manjak symbolism the topological inverse of the human bodily shape (a hollow conical or cylindrical space) is encountered, and modern glass bottles, which happen to fit this description rather well, are among the most conspicuous material items in Manjak ritual and everyday life, dominating conversations and actions to an incredible extent.

Confronted with such continuity between mind and body, macrocosm and microcosm, one can only guess at the psychosomatic implications of a cosmology that presents the human body, with its constant flow in and out of corporeal and social matter, as the imperfect incarnation of the perfectly closed, life-giving Land, the principal deity of the society. One suspects possibilities of symbolic and corporeal transfer and transposition in which symptom and economic action, exchange and well-being merge to an extent that may well be deemed capable of eluding anything but the most brutal confrontation with the logic of capitalism. Whether this symbolic system in itself has been a principal factor in keeping cap-

italism out, or whether the overall nature of the political economy of this part of the African Atlantic coast has merely facilitated the emergence and persistence of this symbolic system, remain questions for further research.

Back to Political Economy

The *pubols* of the *napenes* and their rituals occupy a curious position in this structure by combining elements of the overall idiom with their opposites (e.g., elaborate womb-like shrines and conspicuous libation basins, which tend to occur in pairs and particularly suggest a topological inversion of human breasts). Here, the supernatural (which, in its corporeal manifestation, is so unapproachable, forbidding, and masculine in other aspects of this cosmology) suddenly appears as approachable, bodily, and maternal. And it is here, in divination and ritual, that mortals can attempt to have direct communion with the Land (through the sacrificial dregs—the decayed and smelling remains of many earlier offerings of blood, palm wine, and rum from the shrine's altar and libation basins—that the priest, with bare hands, smears directly onto the client's naked body). In participating in this ritual, the client seeks to manipulate and set limits to its formidable powers—a poor man's version of the exalted ideals of the dominant Land cult. As a distorting mirror of this cult's aspirations and negations, this aspect of Manjak ritual can and does lend itself to ritual entrepreneurship and innovation. Here clients' expenses are at a level comparable to that of the ancestral and Land cult, but they are seen as payment and, in addition to prestations in kind, involve considerable amounts of money. The etiological repertoire of the *pubol* attendants is no longer nonspecific and general, but identifies particular complaints and their proper remedies. The relation between healer and patient is no longer cast in the idiom of belonging to and venerating the same local Land (although the Land cult does claim its share from every transaction going on in the *pubols*), but rather in the idiom of contract. In other words, at the oracular shrines we encounter a type of transformation of the dominant Manjak symbolic idiom that is not only feminine, routinized, and eroded, but that also begins to develop the well-known traits of commoditization and constitutes the locus of capitalist encroachment in this otherwise impenetrable socio-ritual system.

Little wonder, perhaps, that this is the aspect of the Manjak ritual scene that accommodated me more than any other, to which I could relate most, and that even appeared to offer partial but usable answers to my own existential needs.

Here we are operating at the very periphery of the Manjak socio-ritual and medical system. Reference to capitalism does not begin to explain the patterns of symbolism, continuing gerontocracy, migrant participation, and therapeutic effectiveness that constitute the core of Manjak society. Yet why should a Marxist-inspired approach to religion confine itself to the capitalist mode of production? A closer look at the noncapitalist relations of production on which Manjak village society continues to depend may suggest alternative ways to break away from the religious anthropologist's fixation on cosmology and ideology and lay bare the patterns of economic action and exploitation that are really at work. Are not the youth, through their expensive ritual participation, investing in the sort of ideological capital that one day, when they have become elders themselves, they may claim as their own? Are not the elders transmuting capitalist capital into Manjak

capital, laundering proceeds from labor migration that otherwise would remain utterly devoid of meaning and value, even for the young migrants themselves? Rather than conceiving of the body as Land, could we not try to reverse the equation and spell out what it means—both symbolically and economically—that the human body, locus of productive force *par excellence*, is symbolically externalized, slighted, and denied?

When a noncapitalist society scarcely seems to yield to capitalist encroachment, it is tempting to resort to a neoclassic, idealist interpretation, thus reconstructing and making explicit what is implied in the local ideology. In the long run, however, it would be more rewarding to seek and formulate a specific political economy that is cut to the measure of that society. In this vein Peter Worsley (1956) reinterpreted Tallensi society as analyzed by Fortes. As far as Manjak society is concerned, however, that part of my task only now begins to be discernible.

NOTES

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¹I have pursued a materialist approach for a number of years (van Binsbergen 1979, 1981a; van Binsbergen and Geschiere 1985). I have repeatedly confessed my guilty conscience (1981a; 10f, 73f; 1981b, 1984a, 1985), and stressed the need for synthesis of Marxian ideas and the sophisticated insights of mainstream symbolic anthropology (1981a: 68f; van Binsbergen and Schoffeleers 1985).

²Carreira (1947a, 1947b, 1961) has also described Manjak ritual. De Jong's (1987) general discussion of religious and medical concepts is partly derived from Manjak culture, although most of his specific descriptions deal with other parts of Guinea-Bissau.

³All proper names are pseudonyms.

⁴Visiting daughters of the house are also put up here (and not at the women's house), when the occasion arises.

⁵The Land gives (yields produce) not through orifices in highly localized spots but over extensive land areas.

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