

## Comptes Rendus Méga-Tchad - Mega-Chad Book Reviews

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**Walter E.A. van Beek.** 2012. *The Dancing Dead: Ritual and Religion among the Kapsiki/Higi of North Cameroon and Northeastern Nigeria*. Oxford Ritual Studies (ORS). Oxford University Press (345 pages)

Gerhard Muller-Kosack  
[www.mandaras.info](http://www.mandaras.info)

Note: Due to the multi-layered complexity of the book the reviewer has written more a critical summary than a review and has decided not to apply a higher level of abstraction since the interested reader might find the summary elements of this slightly idiosyncratic book review useful.

Walter von Beek's *The Dancing Dead* is a detailed case study of Kapsiki religion, one characterised as an "imagistic" as opposed to a "doctrinal" mode of religiosity. The author approaches his topic through detailed analyses of their major rituals applying Harvey Whitehouse's notions of "cognitively optimal" and "cognitively costly", the first characterised by "rituals of dwelling" modelled on everyday life and the second by "rituals of belonging" such as funerals or initiation rites which require "some specialisation, religious authority, and surely memory". The influences of Martin Heidegger and Tim Ingold are apparent. Ingold's environmental approach to dwelling and the social aspect of it, which is belonging, leads van Beek to see cognitively optimal rituals as more linked to the physical and historical environment and cognitively costly rituals as more symbolically intriguing. This in turn makes the latter more reliant on episodic memory, including its material embodiments in Kapsiki culture.

Van Beek relies on an enormously rich corpus of field data going back 40 years which also allows him to point out more recent transformations in Kapsiki religious liturgy. His data not only cover aspects of social change over the mentioned period of his fieldwork but also many ethnographic details in terms of material culture related to the rituals in question. His main place of research is the village of Mogode but there is also comparison with other Kapsiki villages, though the comparison with the Nigerian part of this large group of the northern Mandara Mountains, the Higi, is rather rudimentary. The book certainly draws its strength from intimate local knowledge but the ethnographer interested in the wider region sometimes misses a more detailed comparison with neighbouring groups especially when van Beek points out particularities of the Kapsiki. The book is a combination of the most detailed ethnographic descriptions, interspersed with theoretical interpretations. Unfortunately, there are not many graphics or tables despite the obvious complexity of the data.

The book is structured in three parts starting off with a particular Kapsiki funeral described from the observed vantage point of the locals, interspersed with ethnographically informative dialogues between relatives of the dead man about funeral arrangements and we soon discover that almost each chapter starts with a similar localised narrative. This approach personalises the ethnographic material but also leaves the reader a little confused since it sometimes takes several pages before it becomes clear what the specific focus is going to be, especially in terms of the overall objective of the book.

## PART ONE INTRODUCTION

After the above mentioned funeral description as an introduction to Part One we get a short chapter called "Understanding African Ritual" (page 9) in which we are not only introduced into van Beek's fieldwork history in Kapsiksi land, going back to 1971, but we also get some information on the general history and ethnography of the Kapsiki. Then, on page 12, we get a map showing the northern Mandara mountains with the Kapsiki and Higi in the centre. Unfortunately, van Beek repeats the mistake that so many of our French colleagues have made over the years, by leaving a major part of the Nigerian mountains, the Gwoza hills, uncovered - map 1 shows no ethnic groups mentioned for the Gwoza hills and only depicts the Fulbe on the plains (not true anymore either). Some might think that this is irrelevant but considering that van Beek claims to work across the international border of Cameroon and Nigeria, I would have expected a better regional map.

Next we are introduced to what he calls "rituals of dwelling and rituals of belonging" (page 14). He tells us that the notion "dwelling" originally stems from Martin Heidegger (see *Bauen* [Building] *Wohnen* [Dwelling] *Denken* [Thinking], 1951) which Tim Ingold adopted from Heidegger's notion as "the immersion of the organism/person in an environment or life world [Lebenswelt]...". Van Beek goes on to explain that "Ingold contrasts this idea with 'building', the notion that man has to construct a world before he can live in it..." (van Beek doesn't tell us that this was originally also Heidegger's idea and I therefore wonder whether Ingold did either). He quotes Ingold who wrote that "the forms people build ... arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational context of their practical engagement with their surrounding" (ibid). In this sense "dwelling" and "building" rise from the same environment in the most existential way, meaning the two cannot be separated and this has implications also for the study of religion: "Religion does not follow culture nor the reverse, but they mutually constitute each other, resulting in acts and thoughts that can be separated only analytically, not experientially. This view has clear implications for the interpretation of ritual, since these are the actions per se that link man to his environment ... Actually, the ritual act finds its meaning through the actor plus the 'homeland of his thoughts'" (page 15) - In my opinion, Heidegger (1951) all over again, unacknowledged it seems.

Translated into his Kapsiki data van Beek concludes: "The Kapsiki live not in a romantic landscape but in a personalised territory with historical meaning: they 'dwell their mountains'" (ibid). Out of this experientially inseparable view of the relationship between "building", "dwelling" and "thinking" van Beek seems to develop the idea of "rituals of belonging": "An important part of dwelling is more social than ecological, and I have characterized the rituals bearing this focus as the 'rituals of belonging'. Here dwelling in the social environment [in the sense of belonging] dominates" (page 16). This distinction provides an important structure for the book: "In the first part of the book dealing with the more ecological dwellings rituals, sacrifices are central, flanked by all the rituals pertaining to cultivation and harvest. Rites of passage form the core of the second part, which focuses on belonging, and zoom in on births, weddings, initiations, and death, describing how people forge new relationships through ritual pathways" (ibid). At first this divide seems to be too theoretically driven for my taste but in the end van Beek's distinction between "rituals of dwelling"

and "rituals of belonging" turns out to be rather useful, as we can discover in the course of reading this rather voluminous book.

The cognitive approach of Harvey Whitehouse's *Modes of Religiosity* (2004) is admittedly the second major component within van Beek's theoretical approach to understand his Kapsiki data. He explains this to us in his sub-section "The Meaning of Ritual" (page 16ff) by saying that "This approach focuses on the cognition generated by different types of ritual and is based on the fundamental notion that religious concepts and practices have to be remembered". Van Beek goes on to summarise in a couple of pages the theoretical distinction between "low and high frequency in rituals and between low and high arousal through the ritual, with the high-arousal rituals tending to be low in frequency and visa versa" and how this relates to Whitehouse's notion of "imagistic" and a "doctrinal" modes of religiosity. Because the imagistic mode "combines low-frequency/high-intensity [meaning presumably the same as high-arousal] van Beek concludes that the "Kapsiki religion is a typical traditional religion, in which the features of the imagistic mode abound because their rituals are based on "episodic memory" set in a social environment with little religious leadership, no orthodoxy, and no exegetic control. He also points out that the distinction is about "modes" and not "types" of religiosity and that both modes appear in any religion (page 17).

Van Beek writes that he tries to refine Whitehouse's approach by applying it to his Kapsiki data (ibid). In doing so he uses the concept of "cognitive optimal" and "cognitive costly rituals" throughout and one has to take in what the concepts actually mean very early in the book. He explains his approach to refinement by saying that he uses the "distinction not only for concepts but also for rituals" (ibid). Van Beek's premise within Whitehouse's "modes theory is that rituals (not just concepts) can be cognitively optimal as well... Other rituals, which we will encounter in the rites of belonging, are less self-evident, have to be taught and learned, are cognitively costly. The initiation rites and funeral proceedings in particular show such costly characteristics. So the contrast as well as interaction between cognitively optimal and cognitively costly rituals characterizes the rituals dynamics in this [Kapsiki] religion" (ibid).

After this theoretical introduction comes a chapter "Slaves, War, and the Wider World". Here we get an introduction into the pre-colonial history of the Kapsiki. Not only is this chapter in a confusing place - I felt I wanted to get straight into the rituals of dwelling part - it is also a rather general chapter in terms of its informative substance. For example his history of slave raiding contains for my taste not enough ethno-historical regionalisation. This is followed by a chapter called "Colonial Powers and Reluctant Ethnicity" which is ethno-historically more specific but one continues to wonder why all this information is needed at this point.

## PART TWO RITUALS OF DWELLING

Part Two deals with the rituals of dwelling, covering over hundred pages of the book, beginning with a description of the mountain environment, the layout of a house and the home sacrifice, always illustrated by personalised field accounts of van Beek's local informants. In the context of this we are introduced to the concept of *shala* (god), the significance of the *tame* (plaited granary) and *mele* (sacrificial jar,

sacrifice): "A sacrificial jar is made at the death of a parent; before that time one has another type of *mele*, usually a flint stone or quartz the size of a fist, or small jars. Boys get their stone from their fathers, girls from their mothers, and during initiation the boys get a proper *mele* (see Chapter 10) while the girls use the largest of the small jars presented during their first wedding as their *mele* (see Chapter 9), jars her new groom has given her. As with all pottery, smith women make the *mele* as well. A son orders one after the death of his father, giving some specifications... During the sacrifice, as we have seen, the *mele* is addressed as 'father' or 'mother.' The jars serve only the direct descendants because one's personal *mele* is destroyed during one's funeral rites. Some special jars function as collective points of reference in the ward's or the village's sacrifice and for the rooster ordeal. Though sacrifices also address other spots in the house, such as the wall, it is always the *mele* that gets the first taste of the sacrifice. The jar may be used as regular beer jar when beer is brewed for consumption only... However, only people from the compound or close friends can drink from the *mele*" (page 63).

In the following sub-section van Beek describes the home sacrifice as an optimal rite. There is for example "the notion of the meal ... It is in fact a normal family meal, but for the presence of the unseen, those family members that are dead - father - or defined as being invisible, *shala*. So a sacrifice like the one describe above is a cognitively optimal ritual as defined in Chapter 2, one that comes quickly to mind, is easily remembered, and has a liturgy that does not require a good episodic memory, since it is just a normal meal with and extra guest... The cognitively optimal aspect is [also] highlighted by, for instance, the absence of formulate speech, since the spoken texts are quite simple, straightforward, and informal. People just tell *shala* what they want, and what they want are just the basics of life: food, health, fertility, and reasonable relations. And please no evil, not here at least. There is nothing special there, and thus sacrifice is in a way 'nothing special,' it is just doing what comes naturally" (page 71f).

Next we are introduced to "The Ward Sacrifice" (page 75), "The Lineage Sacrifice" (page 77) and the "The Village Sacrifice". We learn that the same sacrificial pattern applies to them since they "are, in fact an expansion of the home sacrifice" (page 71) and that they are all rituals of dwelling and cognitively optimal. However, "some elaboration sets in. In village ritual, officiators have to know how to do it and certain aspects have to be taught. That is not too much yet in the absence of large oral texts, but aspiring officiators are well aware of the knowledge required, a knowledge that is typically 'local': where to undress, where to stand, how to walk to the *mele*, and what to say. That is what truly counts" (page 72).

In Chapter 6 of the "Rituals of Dwelling", called "The Other Side of the World", we are also introduced in greater detail to the Kapsiki concept of spirit agent, god and personhood, myth, history, and Hwempetla, the village hero. Chapter 6 ends with the sub section "Exegetical Reflexion, Agency and Invisibility" where van Beek points out that the Kapsiki lack "the notion of ancestors... *shala* [god] is neither an ancestor, nor a spirit, nor a real high god. The usual categories just do not match. What makes it confusing is the referential domination of the concept, which means that the term *shala* can be used in many expressions, all of which relate to just *shala*. So the core of Kapsiki religion is an almost purely relational concept, part of a human-based social theology... After all, a spirit is the supernatural 'other,' a being that has its own

volition and agency, but *shala* is the 'supernatural self', thus the volition and agency of a person and his *shala* coincide... Neither is the notion of ancestors applicable. Ancestors in African religions seem almost a must, so why are they absent here? Is Hwempetla [the culture hero] an ancestor? Technically, as the progenitor of many clans, yes, but on the other hand he is not the founder of the village [Mogode]... The point here is that Kapsiki religion, because of the specific notion of *shala* as a 'supernatural' double, in fact has no cognitive space for an intermediary between man and god. The relations in Kapsiki religion are direct and short, just to the dead father, just to the personal *shala*, one's double-up-there, no second layer, no intermediaries or go-betweens" (page 125).

Part Two carries on with some other rituals of dwelling linked to the rain and here, in Chapter 7, van Beek addresses the "Cycle of Ritual". It starts off with the sub-section "Initiating a Granary", followed by "Hunting Rain", "How to Buy Rain: Rain and Power", "Chasing Death", "Locust, Leopards and Gudur" and ends with "Harvest and its Rituals", "First Hunt" and "Coping with Risk and Time". There is almost too much ethnographic information packed into all of this which makes it impossible to do the book justice in the context of a book review.

### PART THREE RITUALS OF BELONGING

The third and last part of the book begins with Chapter 8, "Starting Life" by describing the intricacies of the birth of twins, a classic "cognitive costly" ritual. The ethnographic details are rich but also a bit all over the place. There is also the already mentioned lack of comparison with other montagnard groups; although van Beek in this book does not set out to draw regional comparisons, it seems fair to suggest that a little more relevant regional comparison could have usefully replaced some of the rather irrelevant Kapsiki detail.

After the usual localised ethnographic narrative of the "First appearance", the presenting of the twins to the local public and the apparent ethnographic fact that rituals are more "costly", or should we say complex, we next get an introduction into the concept of Kapsiki personhood. After that we learn about naming, again accompanied with a wealth of ethnographic information. Then we come to a sub-section called "Twins" (page 169) and we get an even deeper understanding about the social, ritual and symbolic significance of twins in Kapsiki society. This is followed by how twins are celebrated, like that "everything has to happen in twos - for example, two chickens per day" (page 176). Finally there is a subsection on "Symbols of Personhood" and we learn that other than optimal rituals, where explanations are obvious and close to the actual home (for example the communal meal) twin rituals are cognitively costly and require ritual specialism in order to avoid mistakes (page 178). This also means that larger sections of the local community need to be involved or could be affected which would not be the case with rituals surrounding ordinary or single births. All this makes twin rituals a classic case of a cognitively costly ritual.

Part Three of the book continues to use the life cycle of a person to demonstrate the meaning of belonging (rather than dwelling) and in Chapter 9 we learn about the significance of "The Bridal Skirt", again embedded in a local ethnographic narrative to start off with, telling us, how "Kwada's father Tizhè invites the wives of his other sons to prepare the *livu*, the bride's iron skirt" (page 182). The whole ethnographic

description is geared towards another Kapsiki example of a very important "cognitively costly" ritual of belonging in a person's social calendar. We first learn about the "Calling of the Bride", next about "The Wedding" (we also get an insight into modern changes)... and so the book carries on, moving through the most detailed ethnographic descriptions, sometimes with a detour to another lateral ethnographic aspect of it - it would be impossible to capture all of this in the context of this book review! Eventually we come to the final element called "The Iron Bride: Symbols of Belonging". There it is explained that "Cognitively costly rituals sport a plethora of symbols, and here, truly, 'symbols have sex.' Symbolism is much less straightforward, much less minimal than in the dwelling rituals... it is the *livu* that is the central symbol. The core element is, evidently iron. A bride is decked out in iron objects... The Kapsiki offer two interpretations for iron. The first is wealth... [but] Marriage presents a new kind of wealth for the groom, namely offspring... it is here that the second, more pervading association is located, that is stability and immobilization..." (pages 204-206) - so, according to van Beek, iron symbolises this too in the context of the social significance of marriage!

Chapter 9 of Part Three of the book, "The Brass Boys", deals with initiation. Chapter 10 is called "Harvesting Crops, Harvesting People" and Chapter 12 "The Dancing Dead". The title of Chapter 13 is "Dynamics of Kapsiki Rituals" and it forms a kind of a summarizing chapter in which van Beek points out that his personal journey as a field anthropologist in Kapsiki land underwent a development cycle in which "the first experience of a strange ritual is more gut-felt and existential than reflective" and that analysis came later. I think this is a very honest statement and that the book somehow reflects this, his personal professional development. This is visible in the fact that there is so much ethnographic detail in the book, perhaps too much, one could say, constantly blurring the boundary between ethnographic illustration based on field experience and the desire to get and keep a theoretical grip. This doesn't make the book an easy read but forces the reader to plunge deep into long pages of detailed ethnographic description, sometimes desperately longing for a more selective order to better suit the theoretical ambitions, this account clearly wants to fulfil. As an ethnographer of some of the neighbouring groups of the Kapsiki, in particular the Mafa to the north of the Kapsiki but also the Dghwede and other groups of the Gwoza hills, I learned a lot from reading this book, not only in terms of comparison (not necessarily pointed out in the book) of ethnographic details but also through the theoretical approach of "cognitively optimal" being linked to rituals of dwellings and "cognitively costly" being linked to rituals of belonging; this made me compare and classify matching similarities within the region. The other element of the book, the symbolic interpretation of materials used to make ritual objects, for example iron and brass, I found even more inspiring. Overall this is a difficult but very rich book, useful in particular for scholars of religious studies and the regional ethnographer interested in modes of religiosity, the overlapping conceptualisation of imagistic and dogmatic religions and how this distinction plays out in the world of real ethnography.