

VICTOR WITTER TURNER (1920–83)

Roy Willis writes:

There was an extraordinary consistency about the life and work of Victor Turner, who died in Charlottesville, Virginia, on 18 December 1983. The Glasgow-born son of an engineer father and an actress mother, his pacifist convictions made him a conscientious objector to military service in World War II, then led him into the dangerous work of bomb disposal in Britain during the Blitz. It may well have been the heightened social awareness induced by these early experiences that brought him to anthropology. After studying the subject under Daryll Forde at University College, London, Turner taught it briefly at Manchester University before joining Max Gluckman's Rhodes-Livingstone Institute as research officer in 1951. He apparently found the brand of humanistic Marxism prevailing there – a legacy from the administration of Godfrey Wilson – congenial to his idealist temperament. With characteristic consistency, he also became a member of the Communist Party. In the early '50s he did anthropological research among the Ndembu, a sub-group of the Lunda, in what was then Northern Rhodesia. From this research resulted Turner's first major publication, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (1957). In it he acknowledged Forde, Gluckman and Fortes as his major sources of anthropological inspiration. But this thoroughly workmanlike piece of functionalist analysis was also notable for an important theoretical innovation: the concept of 'social drama'. This ingenious metaphorical device enabled Turner to bring together the mechanics of a cyclical process of dissolution and reconstruction in a matrilineal society with a coherent portrayal of believable human beings in situations of both normative and emotional conflict. By the time of the appearance of his Ndembu monograph, Turner had renounced Communism, possibly as a result of the Soviet suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, and in 1957 was received into the Roman Catholic Church.

Turner's disillusion with Marxism was paralleled in his anthropology with a rejection of the mechanistic functionalism he had learned from Gluckman and the Manchester school:

I filled my notebooks with genealogies; I made village hut-plans and collected census material; I prowled around to catch the rare and unwary kinship term. Yet I felt uneasily that I was always on the outside looking in, even when I became comfortable in my use of the vernacular. For I was constantly aware of the thudding of ritual drums in the vicinity of my camp . . . Eventually, I was forced to recognize that if I wanted to know what even a segment of Ndembu culture was really about, I would have to overcome my prejudice against ritual and start to investigate it. [*The Ritual Process*, p. 7]

Thereafter, in successive accounts of Ndembu divination (1961), the cult of the divinity Chihamba, rites of passage, and Ndembu hunting ritual (all in 1962), the distinctive qualities of Turner's emergent anthropological 'style' are vividly on display: a fine sensitivity for ethnographic detail, combined with a persistent attention to the wider, universal significance of his findings. This explicit concern with both the concrete particular and the general, virtually unknown in British anthropology since Malinowski, was also apparent in Turner's pioneering study of Ndembu colour symbolism, published in 1963.

But these various studies of Ndembu ritual were but the prelude to an inquiry which was unprecedented in its detailed elucidation of the thought patterns

pervading an African culture. *The Forest of Symbols* (1967) and *The Drums of Affliction* (1968) are milestones in the progress of this inquiry. During it, Turner introduced his readers to that extraordinary character Muchona the Hornet, his major informant, the Ogotemmel of Central Africa. Turner's distinctions between indigenous, operational, and positional levels of analysis effected a needful clarification in anthropology's approach to symbolic data. While acknowledging his intellectual indebtedness to Monica Wilson, Turner was unable to accept Wilson's principle of going no further in explanation of symbolic meaning than her or his informants' own statements. In Turner's view, 'The anthropologist who has previously made a structural analysis of Ndembu society . . . can observe the real interconnections and conflicts between groups and persons, insofar as these receive ritual representation. What is meaningless for an actor playing a specific role may well be highly significant for an observer and analyst of the total system' (*Forest of Symbols*, p. 27). Turner was later to add an important qualification to this statement. At least in the case of the Ndembu, with their paucity of myths, knowledge of 'the total system' was to be obtained 'atomistically and piecemeal' through patient analysis of ritual symbols. There were, according to Turner, 'no short cuts, through myth and cosmology, to the structure – in Lévi-Strauss's sense – of Ndembu religion' (*The Ritual Process*, 1966, p. 20). Though subsequently challenged by Luc de Heusch in *Le roi ivre* (1972), it was from this Popperian position that Turner was able to reveal the full structural complexity of Ndembu cosmology. Ndembu symbolic concepts are not only arrayed analogically in binary pairs *à la* Lévi-Strauss, they are also organized, at a higher level, into triads and into three mutually exclusive sets of binary pairs. The importance of this discovery of hierarchic ordering in Ndembu cosmology was somewhat obscured by Turner's seemingly unnecessary preoccupation (for which he was duly rebuked by Lévi-Strauss in *L'homme nu*) with the Eurocentric opposition of cognition and affect (*The Ritual Process*, pp. 37–43).

It was at the onset of his prolonged and exhaustive investigation of Ndembu ritual symbolism that Turner left Britain for the United States, a more spacious arena that was to provide him with his academic base for the rest of his life. Beginning at Cornell University in 1964, he became Professor of Social Thought and Anthropology in Chicago in 1968 before moving to the University of Virginia in 1977. In 1965 he had received the Royal Anthropological Institute's Rivers Memorial Medal in recognition of the excellence of his fieldwork.

It was during his later, American years that Turner, developing a crucial insight of van Gennep in *Les Rites de passage*, became increasingly interested in the significance of the 'liminal' phase in the ritual process, when human beings temporarily pass beyond the categories and constraints of social classification. Turner became convinced that the state of what he was to call *communitas*, adopting and adapting a term of Paul Goodman's, was an essential component of human experience, one that had been obscured by an erroneous equation of the 'social' with the 'social-structural' (*societas*).

In *communitas*, according to Turner, human beings momentarily confronted one another in the wholeness and spontaneity of Martin Buber's celebrated 'I–Thou' relationship. It was a moment of unequalled creative potential in which new social configurations were forged: there was thus a perpetual oscillation in human society between structure and *communitas*. Failing to find adequate support for this thesis in the work of his colleagues doing their 'normal social science'

according to the structural-functional paradigm, Turner proceeded to ransack world literature, both religious and secular, for the evidence he sought (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 1974, p. 46).

This impassioned search – for such it was – took Turner to the history of medieval Europe and colonial Mexico, Vedic mythology and Zen Buddhism, and the poetry of Shakespeare. The pursuit of *communitas* in the worldwide institution of religious pilgrimage sent him to India, Japan, Mexico, and Brazil. A revived interest in the allied concept of ‘social drama’, now recognized as a universal (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, p. 33). led him to the study of counter-cultural ‘happenings’ and the New York Street Theater of Richard Scheckner. Out of these multifarious yet related pursuits came a stream of publications, demonstrating wide and voracious scholarship and including *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), written in collaboration with his wife Edith.

For a number of reasons, Turner’s discovery of *communitas* has yet to receive general recognition for the major scientific achievement it was. No doubt the concept is in need of further development. As presented by Turner, it often tended to have a somewhat Pollyanna-ish air, a result of his comparative neglect of the complementary destructive and terrifying aspect of liminality, the dark side of Shiva. His frequent conflation of the *communitas* concept with related ideas in Oriental and European mystical traditions seems to have obscured, alike for Turner and for others, recognition of the distinctively *African* roots of this socio-centric religious vision.

Turner’s persistent refusal to be constrained by disciplinary boundaries, in an age of increasing specialization and sub-specialization, has also impeded reception of his ideas by his anthropological colleagues. This ‘fault’, which should be counted a singular virtue, is one that distinguished his work to the end: in the last months of his life Turner was investigating the possible connections between cerebral anatomy and ritual behaviour and had written an as yet unpublished paper on the topic.

It would be absurd to conclude this brief account without some evocation of the man himself. To be in Vic’s presence was an unforgettable experience, for in him there was, most unusually, no apparent division between life and work. In his exuberant openness to his fellows and to their ideas, he *was* Mr *Communitas*. It is reliably reported that, after Vic had been laid to rest according to the rites of his Church, his family and friends celebrated the solemn occasion Ndembu-style, with drums and masked dancing. Fittingly: in his earthy shrewdness and compassion, Vic was very like a wise African elder. Now that he has been translated to ancestorhood, his generous spirit will surely continue to inspire those who come after.