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Dialogue and the Interpretation of Illness: Conversations in a Cameroon Village by Robert Pool
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REVIEWS OF BOOKS


This is an original and thought-provoking book. Now that the first excitement over ‘postmodern’ anthropology’s attack on anthropological fieldwork methods has died down, its broader relevance is more easily seen. It is certainly influenced by ‘postmodern’ anthropology (Pool clearly does not like this label and prefers ‘experimental ethnography’), as is clear from the sound and yet imaginative use of dialogues in the text. But Pool uses this technique for purposes of his own. Of special interest is that his attempt to surpass the eternal and quite sterile contrast between ‘emics’ and ‘etics’ (local and scientific interpretations) comes from a field where the pressures towards scientific objectivity in service of social relevance are always quite strong: medical anthropology.

The original aim of Pool’s research was to discover the cultural factors that could explain the high incidence of kwashiorkor in the western Grassfields of north-west Cameroon. This children’s illness is often associated with malnutrition, yet the Grassfields are a fairly rich agricultural area. Hence the question: which cultural factors could explain this apparent paradox? In the present book the kwashiorkor issue gradually disappears behind a fascinating discovery tour—terms like ‘puzzlement’ or even ‘bewilderment’ regularly recur—of how the Wimbum people discuss illness and its causes in general. The material that is more directly related to kwashiorkor is treated by Pool in separate publications.

From the start of his research (in 1985) Pool opted for a method in which his Walkman was to play a central role. He consistently taped most of his conversations, informal ones as well as more regular interviews: ‘a replacement of the notebook by the cassette recorder as the basic tool of the ethnographer’. In retrospect he sees this choice as an act of resistance to the ‘objectivist assumptions of applied, problem-solving anthropology . . . [and] to the grant-giving agencies with their narrow, ethnocentric and scientific conceptions of relevance’ (p. 241). This resistance is certainly clear from his subsequent choice to build his book around the dialogues he taped (and transcribed!) so dutifully. Pool does not see this method as some sort of panacea or new orthodoxy. In a later book, equally rich and evocative, on how decisions on euthanasia are reached in a Dutch hospital (Vragen om de sterven [Asking to Die], 1998—unfortunately still not translated into English, he uses it in a quite different form. Moreover he emphasises in the present book that his texts do not pretend to be ‘mirror image representations of “real” encounters’ (p. 239). Indeed, he severely criticises (p. 244) postmodern gurus like Marcus and Fischer for clinging to the idea that anthropologists have to strive for ‘more authentic representations’—that is, for implicitly holding on to the idea that there is an objective reality out there. For Pool, the dialogues in his book are intended to evoke—‘to evoke my confusion and puzzlement during discussions in the field’ (p. 240). And this they do. They are not only fascinating to read, they show also in a self-evident way how from all the half- or misunderstandings between Pool, his assistants and the Wimbum people they talk to (and equally among the Wimbum themselves) images gradually emerge that are more or less convincing to all of them. Thus Pool’s dialogues show that ethnography is about ‘the production of meaning rather than the gathering of
pre-existing information'. Or, as Pool quotes Fabian, his Ph.D. supervisor, ethnography is 'performative' rather than 'informative'.

Pool's vivid dialogues give substance to this idea of fieldwork as a 'performance'—by anthropologists as much as by informants. They show how his informants' puzzlement at his questions on kwashiorkor opens up ever new horizons. Already in Pool's very first interview on kwashiorkor, *tvu* ('witchcraft') emerges, in the beginning mainly described as culminating in evil meetings of cannibals devouring their own kin. But this theme leads unto *mnywu* ('gods') and *bkwubshi* ('ancestors') as bringers of illness. However, behind this 'religious' discourse looms again *tvu* ('witchcraft'), but now in a very different manifestation: as a positive occult power of elders who are actually behind the actions ascribed to 'gods' and 'ancestors', punishing people who transgress the norms. On all these topics the informants are constantly contradicting each other and changing their views. Yet, for all this confusion, some coherence emerges: certainly not a 'system', rather a series of 'partly consistent themes'—of 'meaning . . . partially produced in a praxis of which the research process is part' (p. 259).

Indeed, one of Pool's main targets is the idea of a 'medical system': a 'system of local knowledge' as a counterpart or an alternative to a Western biomedical system, supposed to be equally coherent. His fascinating analysis of the changing faces of 'witchcraft', and of the open and tentative ways in which his informants relate these hidden forces to illness, is an enticing example of what 'experimental ethnography' should be about. It shows even more vividly how dangerous it is for an anthropologist to succumb to the pressures of funding agencies to present such 'local knowledge'—despite all its complexity and variability—in ready-to-eat chunks.

A more hidden strength of the book is Pool's sense of composition. After all the emphasis on uncertainty and 'emergent themes' the epilogue comes as a surprise. Lawrence, Pool's headstrong assistant—who chose Pool rather than the other way round—runs into serious difficulties; his real friendship with Pool suddenly turns into indifference on both sides. The most probable explanation of his abrupt déconfiture is that he was victimised by defenders of 'tradition' whose secrets he had betrayed. Even if 'tradition' is not a system, it clearly has a force of its own.

This book is a must not only for those interested in debates on anthropology and fieldwork but also for any applied researcher who objects to undue simplification of his/her results.

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The Beja people live in a semi-arid mountainous area in north-eastern Sudan. Because of its title and the period of fieldwork (1993–94–95, presumably totalling less than a year), I expected that the book under review would be another contribution to our knowledge and understanding of people's strategies for survival. But much of the book consists of cognitive psychological and general theoretical arguments, to which ethnographic accounts of the people's ideas and experiences are rather subordinated.

After the introductory chapters the author identifies three states of sickness: