Review Essays

Hegemony and Culture in Historical Anthropology: A Review Essay on Jean and John L. Comaroff's *Of Revelation and Revolution*

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IN THE RECENT RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY AND HISTORY, one of the most important projects is Jean and John L. Comaroff's study of the colonial mission in South Africa. In this large, two-volume work spanning almost 200 years and over 700 pages, the Comaroffs tell the history of the colonial encounter on the South African frontier and detail its contemporary consequences.[1] More a history of culture than a history of persons or events, this work presents the story of the changes in cultural meanings and practices taking place over time in a region of radical political, economic, and religious transformation. Although it begins from the role of the mission, the scope of the project extends into an exploration of changing conceptions of agriculture, money, healing, fashion, architecture, house furnishings, law, property, and subjectivity. This work contributes to the effort to expand the terrain of data and methods of historical analysis and to re-theorizing and historicizing culture.

By focusing on the way the unnoticed and undiscussed features of social practice and meaning contribute to maintaining or changing relations of power, these two volumes contribute to the move within history to expand the subjects relevant to historical analysis and the ways of analyzing them. The volumes are less an examination of events, persons, and narratives than of the cultural interstices of the historical process. They track the exercise of power in the unexamined domains of everyday social life. They have made an enormous impact on the field of anthropology, particularly on the critical issue of the reformulation of the notion of culture, the core concept of the discipline. Rethinking what culture means has consumed the field for the last two decades, and these two books have spurred the effort.[2] Within anthropology, they have been widely praised for breaking new ground theoretically as well as criticized for failing to present an adequate temporal

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[1] Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. 1: *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, Vol. 2: *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago, 1991, 1997).

[2] See, for example, James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986); Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

and narrative account of historical change.[3] As I will argue, however, this critique fails to appreciate the contribution a focus on hegemony makes to understanding historical change and the historicity of culture.

This review will consider two questions: First, how has this work expanded the approaches and materials available for historical investigation? The focus on hegemony offers an approach to understanding power within everyday social life as it is embedded in cultural understandings and practices. Second, how has this work contributed to the re-theorization of that continually vexing yet anthropologically central concept, culture? In recent years, this term has taken on new significance in related fields, such as cultural studies, and has become a critical feature of identity politics. Yet, as everyday discourse has rendered the term more fixed and bounded, anthropological theory has developed a more flexible, contested, and unbounded conception.

Volume 1 was published in 1991 and Volume 2 in 1997. In many ways, their innovations in method and theory have been taken up in subsequent years in both history and anthropology. When assessing their impact, it is important to remember that many of the ideas that seemed novel when they were first published are now taken for granted and that the turn to this way of understanding history and culture has expanded during the 1990s.

THIS WORK IS NOT A HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICA, nor does it claim to be one. It is a history of the making of a new hegemony on the South African frontier out of the cultural repertoires of the Southern Tswana, the Nonconformist missionaries, and, in the background, the settlers, the mining companies, the British imperial government, and Britain itself. It is a complement to existing histories, not a replacement for them. The subject of investigation is not actors, events, and narratives but the creation of unrecognized and unarticulated cultural patterns, modes of thinking, and physical representations that reflect or justify particular relations of power. The empirical basis is not only texts such as letters, reports, novels, and poetry but also buildings, clocks, village arrangements, rituals, and a whole series of materializations of everyday life. These are the forms of evidence typically considered within anthropology and cultural studies, with its emphasis on the power of discourses and representations. The Comaroffs' study examines the unspoken, everyday practices and categories that control thought and action without being noticed. Thus this work needs to be read in conjunction with more conventional historical accounts.

The core analytical concept on which both volumes rest seems to be that of hegemony. The Comaroffs carefully define this concept in Volume 1, and the meaning of this term governs the choice of data and the shape of both volumes. Hegemony refers to the unspoken, taken-for-granted assumptions about person and action that shape social life even though they are not brought to consciousness. There is thus an implicit and unrecognized quality to those meanings and practices

[3] Donald L. Donham, "Essay: Thinking Temporally or Modernizing Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 103 (2001): 134–50, quote p. 138.

that fall under the rubric of hegemony. The Comaroffs define hegemony as "that order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images and epistemologies—drawn from a historically situated cultural field—that come to be taken-for-granted as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it." Once such signs and meanings become recognized and explicitly articulated, they fall into the domain of ideology and are more susceptible to contestation.[4] What is hegemony and what is ideology is not fixed; the boundary is fluid. Ideas and practices move across it constantly, both at the level of individual consciousness and in more collective cultural practice. An individual may have experiences that make him or her aware of hegemonic relations of power, which then immediately become contested. Such transformations in consciousness contribute to practices of resistance. Indeed, perhaps the very act of reading these books shifts hegemonic understandings to ideological ones, opening them to challenge. Such a shift seems compatible with the intent of the authors, whose goals include making hegemonic understandings visible and unmasking the processes of their making and unmaking over time.

The focus on hegemony is designed to uncover the way such cultural understandings shape relations of power, making domination seem natural and suppressing forms of resistance. Exposing the implicit and unstated aspects of cultural life in order to defamiliarize them is an approach with deep roots in anthropology, apparent in such classic works as Horace Miner's study of the "Nacirema" (aka Americans).[5] In the 1950s, Miner described this culture's fixation with bathrooms, an insight reinforced a half-century later by the proclivity to build expensive new houses with more bathrooms than bedrooms. What the Comaroffs add to the anthropological process of revealing the apparently natural as cultural is their focus on power. They draw on a Marxist tradition through Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams as well as the Birmingham school and Michel Foucault. They claim that, in understanding historical change, it is critical to see how people come to think of themselves and their everyday social relationships in new ways so that transformation occurs not only by force but also by persuasion. Their concern is not how or why changes happen but how they are understood by variously positioned actors. Political economy remains crucial, but culture, symbolism, and ideology are also fundamental to the domain of power; thus, for example, the Christian mission acts in conjunction with material forces rather than separate from them.[6]

As Foucault has demonstrated in his studies of the genealogies of major modern institutions such as the prison and the mental institution, power exists in the unrecognized corners of social life as well as in more explicit and conventionally understood locations. These hidden domains are of central concern to the Comaroffs. There has been increasing attention to these locations and their implications for power relations in historical as well as anthropological research over the past two decades, inspired in part by Foucault's work. On the South African frontier, where settler interests in lands and mines were conspicuous, this approach highlights less obvious areas such as the Christian mission or architectural

[4] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, quote p. 1: 23; see also 1: 24.
[5] Horace Miner, "Body Ritual among the Nacirema," *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 503–07.
[6] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1: 8.

styles of villages. Indeed, as the Comaroffs note at one point, the surprising feature of the missionaries is that they did so much with so few resources.[7] In my research on missionaries in Hawai'i, I was similarly surprised at the extent of missionary influence despite the lack of support for the mission from the sending community as well as the poverty and sense of isolation and difficulty the missionaries felt.[8] In hindsight, their transformative power seems enormous, but at the time, they felt minimally supported for a project in which their strongest ally was God. Dressed in hand-me-down clothes, living in grass houses, desperate to get slates to equip schools, the missionaries in Hawai'i, as in South Africa, did not experience themselves as the potent force for creating a new hegemony that they now appear. The Comaroffs' central approach is to explore power where it does not seem to reside. They examine power in the domain of culture, in understandings of the self, the community, and the moral order. For those who expect a story of the alienation of land, the imposition of new regimes of labor, and the expansion of empire through conquest, the analysis of such cultural domains might seem to miss the point. However, they take the political and economic framework as given, recognizing and acknowledging it while exploring another dimension of power, that residing in the sphere of cultural meaning and practice. They examine how these changes became thinkable and reasonable to variously positioned actors relying on particular cultural categories of thought and action. "Nakedness," for example, meant not nude nobility to the missionaries but "degeneracy and disorder, the wild and the wanton, dirt and contagion," fueling their insistence that the Tswana wear clothes.[9]

It is not easy to study the unspoken and unrecognized facets of culture in the past, of course. To claim that one has uncovered the hegemonic and exposed it for the reader involves substantial methodological and empirical difficulties, of which the Comaroffs are well aware. One must examine implicit meanings, since as soon as they become explicit, they move into the domain of ideology. While still important, they then become openly subject to contestation and debate and lose some of their power to naturalize social relationships and inequalities. Analysis depends on interpretation, since by definition hegemonic beliefs and practices do not speak directly. Such an interpretive practice is inevitably subject to competing ways of analyzing the same material. Yet examining these domains of meaning and practice provides a productive approach to understanding historical change.

Nevertheless, the reader might wonder if, in the midst of all this contestation over signs and meanings, there is something missing. Ideas and cultural practices rather than institutional structures emerge as powerful. The life stories of particular people whose visions and decisions shaped events are told only in passing. The larger changes in political economy, such as the pressure on land by settlers and the rise of a mining economy with a pattern of migratory wage labor, are rhetorically present: there are frequent references to capitalism and the British state, to the mineral revolution, to the consequences of land alienation and the emiseration of the peasantry. But they are not the central concerns of the volumes. To some extent,

[7] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1: 9.
[8] Sally Engle Merry, *Colonizing Hawai'i: The Cultural Power of Law* (Princeton, N.J., 2000).
[9] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 224.

this is a product of their focus on the early nineteenth century—on the period before colonial control was established and capitalism produced land alienation and migratory wage labor. The Comaroffs are interested in how the meanings and practices brought by the mission prefigured these subsequent economic and political changes.

But it is also because the Comaroffs are exploring the cultural domain of power: hegemony rather than political economy. It is ironic that scholars with a strong Marxist background have written books that appear somewhat bereft of analysis of the political economy of the frontier, but I suspect that this occurred because the changing political economy was part of the taken-for-granted world from which they wrote. It is not that political economy is absent. There are two chapters in Volume 2 that focus on changes in agriculture and in conceptions of wealth and money, and the Comaroffs always seek to join material and ideological dimensions of power. But, as in cultural studies scholarship, those domains of behavior subject to analysis are more often representations and meanings than statistics on land ownership or migration patterns. They are asking how domination was made thinkable: by what categories of person and action the social relations of the frontier in the transition to industrial capitalism and the apartheid state were understood and came to seem justifiable to various actors. Clearly, race and gender are key categories, but so are those of the saved, the sinner, and the productive worker. How those relations were imagined and how the developing inequalities of the frontier were justified and normalized is the central concern of these books. In this sense, the focus of analysis is less about what happened than what kinds of meanings were circulating and how those meanings shaped events. Donald Donham complains that there is too little agency in the accounts of the Tswana,[10] but the relative under-emphasis on individual actors seems reasonable given the authors' concern with uncovering hegemony in the making. Agency does emerge at the ruptures and breaks in consciousness of various groups and of individuals.

Is there sufficient focus on the inevitable incompleteness of hegemony and on forms of resistance? Theories of hegemony acknowledge the continual emergence of counter-hegemonies and resistance, a point the Comaroffs reiterate. They note that hegemony is always being made and can be unmade, that it is never total, that it is "a process as much as a thing."[11] Their interest in hegemony and their recognition that it is part of a contested domain of culture requires that there be space for some challenge to that power, some way of thinking about the fractures in hegemony. They include under the category "resistance" organized protest, explicit movements of dissent, gestures of tacit refusal, and "gestures that sullenly and silently contest the forms of an existing hegemony." Contradictions in consciousness and the consciousness of contradictions can be the source of ever more articulate resistance: "That is why the history of colonialism, even in the most remote backwaters of the modern world, is such a drawn out affair, such an intricate fugue of challenge and riposte, mastery and misery."[12] For example, the evangelical message of the missionaries became part of the emerging hegemony, yet it also gave

[10] Donham, "Essay."
[11] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1: 25.
[12] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1: 31, 1: 26.

rise to new forms of consciousness that sparked forms of resistance that ultimately became part of black consciousness and the fight against apartheid.[13] The Comaroffs' sense of culture as open, contested, and transforming lends itself to theorizing resistance as a form of counter-hegemony within both local and imported cultural understandings.

Yet the analysis of resistance plays a relatively small role in Volume 1 and seems virtually to disappear in Volume 2. The new forms of capitalism and Christianity seem readily adopted by the Tswana, albeit to varying degrees. The new Tswana elites, who have the means to resist, seem most eager to adopt Christianity, European styles of housing and furniture, and hats and skirts. Indeed, the hegemony of the idea of civilization, in the British mode, seems relatively uncontested. Yet it is clear that the seeds of the anti-apartheid struggle were laid in these encounters across the colonial frontier. The authors clearly document the emergence of forms of political consciousness, ideas of rights, and Christian concepts of self that were fundamental to the emerging political opposition. The two volumes take for granted the connection between the shifting consciousness on the historical frontier and the resistance movements of the future but do not develop the linkages.

The concept of resistance has proved difficult to use, even more than hegemony, since in some ways almost everything can be considered resistance. Like hegemony, resistance is a matter of interpretation. There have been debates about whether resistance requires consciousness, whether it needs to be collective, whether it requires a vision of justice, or whether the concept can be extended to include actions based on an inchoate sense of discontent and non-cooperation. The Comaroffs seem to adopt a relatively broad definition that does not require organized social action or an explicit political program. But this broad definition could include a vast array of behavior from painting graffiti on the walls to refusing to do schoolwork. Without a specific political framework against which resistance takes place, the concept becomes incoherent. It needs to be understood within a particular system of power in which the relatively powerless engage in practices that challenge dominant groups in the name of an alternative vision of social justice. Although the graffiti artist and the balky student could be engaging in resistance under this definition, placing their behavior in a political framework distinguishes non-cooperation from actions that constitute resistance against a system of power. The Comaroffs assume rather than elaborate the particular structures of power within which resistant behavior occurs. Further explication would help differentiate resistance from other forms of uncooperative behavior and emphasize its political significance. They clearly assume that the reader is familiar with the anti-apartheid movement, which they see as the legacy of these earlier social processes. Yet, although they have laid the groundwork for that analysis, they do not draw out these connections. Volume 3, which will focus on schooling, promises to make this connection explicit.

[13] See Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1: 12.

IN THE LAST TWO DECADES, there has been great ferment within anthropology, as the concept of culture developed over the first eighty years of the discipline has come under fire. The notion of a bounded, consensual, value-based system of social life that exists in an integrated and relatively static form was very influential until at least the 1950s. Anthropologists did not study problems such as the colonial frontier; instead, they focused on studying "pristine" societies that were untouched by colonial influences or, if they had been influenced, they were treated as if they had not. The forces of change were subtracted in order to produce an imagined primitive, much as the British colonial government of the early twentieth century lionized a past age of Africa in which "traditional" society was homogeneous and unchanged.[14] This perspective blended with the sense that those Africans who had learned urban ways were somehow degenerate, less moral and worthy, detached from their "real" culture. Studies of detribalization emphasized the chaotic and degraded lives of Africans living in the towns in the 1940s and 1950s.[15] Similarly, Hawaiians living in urban areas and adapting to new ways of life did not warrant anthropological attention. Instead, they were worthy of scholarship only in remote rural areas or where their way of life could be reconstructed.

Anthropology is now struggling to think of culture in more flexible ways, as unbounded, changing, contested, and as rooted in practices and habits as well as ideas and values. Not only are there always flows of new ideas, perspectives, and practices, but there are also, within any group, contests over meanings and action. Those in power may use claims to cultural authenticity to force their ideas on others. Subordinated groups may seize other cultural arguments to contest those claims—arguments derived either from contradictions within a society or provided by newcomers or those who have traveled elsewhere. Such processes of reformulation, argumentation, and change are fundamental to any social group, although the rate and extent of contestation may vary.

This set of ideas was developing in anthropology during the 1980s and 1990s, but the Comaroffs' books offer one of the most thorough and sophisticated exemplars of the new approach and were important to the emergence of this perspective in the 1990s. Instead of examining a reconstructed "culture," they focus on the colonial encounter itself, locating their study on the frontier between Tswana life and British imperialism and capitalism. Their focus is the colonization of consciousness and the consciousness of colonization, in which the making of modern South Africa "has involved a long battle for the possession of salient signs and symbols, a bitter, drawn out contest of conscience and consciousness."[16] One of the questions that concerns them is why the Tswana went along with the mission enterprise, the transformation in their dress, their habitations, and their ideas of property and propriety under the influence of the civilizing mission. The answer involves thinking of culture in terms of consciousness as well as examining the processes by which new relations of power become accepted and taken for granted. The Comaroffs define culture as "the space

[14] Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom, and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge, 1985).

[15] For example, Monica Wilson, *The Analysis of Social Change* (Cambridge, 1968).

[16] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1: xi, 1: 4.

of signifying practice, the semantic ground on which human beings seek to construct and represent themselves and others—and hence, society and history."[17]

Ironically, new theories of culture are developing in anthropology just as the older concepts of culture are becoming more central to popular public discourse. The idea of culture in a more homogeneous sense has been absorbed into identity politics, so every group now has its own "culture" that defines its essence. Social groups are often differentiated on the basis of their distinct "cultures"—of religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, region, or nation. Women are frequently the carriers of this culture through their dress, deportment, and acquiescence to practices of marriage and family. The concept of culture in common parlance is the homogeneous, static, consensual, and holistic model of culture from anthropology's past. When governments use the guarding of culture to excuse their failure to protect the human rights of vulnerable populations such as women or racial minorities, for example, they draw on this notion of culture. Some governments, in hearings about their compliance with the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), claim that they are unable to achieve gender equality despite their best efforts because women are oppressed by patriarchal "culture."[18] This concept precludes attention to particular legal constructions of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody and conceals a government's failure to provide schools, health care, and employment opportunities for women. It ignores variations in women's situations based on class, ethnicity, race, region, religion, and many other factors.

In another example of the popular usage of culture, indigenous peoples confront resistance to their claims to resources and reparations when they are unable to prove that they possess an authentic "culture."[19] If they have experienced cultural change, a normal pattern for all social groups, they are often disqualified from making these claims. Ironically, the concept of culture developed by anthropologists in the early twentieth century to defend the rights of small-scale communities to a way of life at odds with the civilizing project of nineteenth and twentieth-century colonialism and its Christian missionaries has been appropriated for the very different political project of resisting progressive reforms and ignoring indigenous claims to reparations.

The entry of a major piece of scholarship on colonialism and historical anthropology into the 1990s debate about what culture is and what role it plays in contemporary political struggles was a welcome contribution. The Comaroffs have made three important innovations. First, they used their detailed ethnography of the Tswana to promote a conception of culture that incorporates historical change and contestation over cultural meanings and practices. Because their work takes a historical perspective, it challenges the principles of consensus and homogeneity inherent in the old anthropological definition of culture. It foregrounds change and

[17] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1: 21.

[18] Established by the United Nations in 1979, this convention has been called a bill of rights for women. Its signatory countries number 170 to date. See http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw. It holds hearings every year at which signatory countries present periodic reports on their compliance with the convention.

[19] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

conflict, although, as they point out, not everything is contested and changing. There are areas of social life that remain relatively untouched. Although many anthropologists have turned to more historical work since the 1980s,[20] the Comaroffs have contributed very significantly to this approach by providing a masterful and theoretically sophisticated examination of a single site over one hundred years placed within the longer time span of the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries.

Their second innovation is the examination of the colonial frontier, a site of intersection between separate cultural worlds, rather than the places where such worlds originate. They focus on points of dialectic and change rather than stasis, examining the shifts in both the frontier and the metropole. For example, they draw intriguing parallels between the image of the African peasant with his or her chaotic world and that of the British poor in London. Each side reshapes the other, although what constitutes a "side" is also a complicated issue, since each is multiply constituted among a group of actors who have quite different interests and perspectives.[21] This approach is perhaps more novel in anthropology than history. They describe this historical process as a "long conversation" between the Southern Tswana and the Nonconformist missionaries, emphasizing the dialectical, iterative character of change.[22] Although they detail the imbalance in the interaction, this metaphor deemphasizes its inequalities of power. However, it does usefully highlight the way each side contributes to producing the conversation itself and the possibility of misunderstandings. As I have shown in a study of American colonialism in Hawai'i, each side only partially understood the other and the implications of the new practices and ideas they were adopting from one another, leading to unanticipated and undesired trajectories of social change. This was particularly significant for the Hawaiian king and chiefs who adopted American legal institutions.[23] The Comaroffs analyze similar misrecognitions in the "conversations" on the South African frontier.

Their third innovation is the focus on domains of social life that fall into the category of the taken for granted and the everyday, such as practices of agriculture, housing, dress, health and hygiene, furnishings, domesticity, or healing. Many of these domains have been the subjects of previous historical and anthropological studies, of course; the Comaroffs' innovation was connecting them to changing relations of power and cultural meaning. They examined these domains in terms of the creation of new relationships of power, new ways of imagining and therefore accepting the inequalities produced by the impact of capitalism and colonialism, and new understandings of gendered, racialized, and ethnicized persons. For example, the Comaroffs explore the remaking of Tswana selves through two competing theories of personhood, one based on law and individual property ownership and the other on primordial sovereignty. The first defined persons by citizenship and rights, the second by membership in a "traditional," "customary"

[20] For example, Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982); Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985); June Starr and Jane F. Collier, eds., *History and Power: New Directions in the Study of Law* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989).

[21] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 23–24.

[22] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 63.

[23] Merry, *Colonizing Hawai'i*.

political community.[24] Both provide the basis for contemporary political mobilization, the first as national political actors, the second as members of primordial ethnic groups. The focus on reading relations of power through the minutiae of everyday life, including its artifacts and habits, is one way to deal with the common problem in colonial research that the Europeans committed their experiences and reactions to writing far more extensively than did many of the people they colonized. This has created imbalances in the extent to which we are able to learn the story from all sides of the colonial encounter.[25] The Comaroffs are quite aware of this issue and seek, by relying on material as well as textual data, to provide a more balanced account.[26]

Despite their commitment to seeing these interactions as multifaceted and their insistence on the importance of escaping the binary of two cultures in contact,[27] there is a tendency to slide into a dualistic analysis. The Comaroffs seek to make sociological analyses that recognize the hybridity and complexity of these intersections while examining the representational practices that construct dualities. Sometimes, they emphasize internal variations, as in their analysis of the Tswana response to the new rhetoric of rights: "Different fractions of the population reacted differently toward the conception of property essayed by the civilizing mission, just as they had in respect of other matters social and cultural, spiritual and material. Still, no one could escape its implications." Yet sometimes the text describes the confrontation as a binary between African and European ways of acting. The book juxtaposes, for example, "On one side, a European sensibility according to which, broadly speaking, the more specific the use to which something was put, the more refined the object, the more cultured the practice, the more civilized the person. On the other, the old Tswana penchant for multi-functionality, which associated versatility and plasticity with use-value, social work, and, often, beauty. These two poles—both tendencies, of course, neither of them simple lived realities—charted the terrain of everyday practice."[28] The chapter on money contrasts the Tswana logic of value focused on cattle with that of the missionaries based on money.[29] It also describes how beads formed a hybrid system between them, but the analysis is largely of a dualistic opposition. Despite the Comaroffs' recognition that the Europeans were a multifaceted group, with tensions between merchants, missionaries, and settlers,[30] between Nonconformists and Anglicans, between British and other nationalities, these groups are often not differentiated. Moreover, although the Comaroffs carefully document the increasing stratification taking place among the Tswana, with chiefly families adopting more of the housing style and dress of Europeans while the poor retained their previous modes of dress, they are sometimes treated as one and the same.

The tendency to present situations in terms of binary oppositions, despite the Comaroffs' commitment to seeing them in more complex ways, reveals the power of

[24] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 369–70.
[25] See Greg Dening, *The Death of William Gooch: A History's Anthropology* (Honolulu, 1995).
[26] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 40–53.
[27] For instance, Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 367.
[28] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 384, 2: 270.
[29] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 190.
[30] See, for instance, Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 184–85.

the old concept of culture, the ease with which one can slip into thinking of culture in this way. This concept of culture informs the reader, as he or she imports the idea into the text, as much as the sources that are available to a scholar of colonialism. Many who wrote about their experiences on the frontier took such dualisms for granted. The Comaroffs have made enormous progress in articulating another way of thinking about culture, a way of linking it to power through their focus on hegemony and their critique of assumptions of consensus. They constantly seek to move beyond these representational practices as they provide sociological analyses. Nevertheless, it is easy for both writer and reader to slip into the old usage, to organize the complexities of social life along the lines of two holistic cultures in confrontation.

The concept of culture that the Comaroffs—along with increasing numbers of anthropologists and historians—are advocating is a major shift from that in common usage and from past practice in both disciplines. It is clear that this is now becoming the dominant theory of culture, but its deployment poses challenges. The Comaroffs have initiated a critically important project in these two volumes, one that has flourished since the 1990s. The disciplines of anthropology and of history have both been enriched by this refashioned understanding of culture.

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