

On Sharing Religious Experience

Possibilities of Interfaith Mutuality

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CIP

What it is like to be a Banzie: On sharing the experience of an Equatorial Microcosm

James W. Fernandez

The anthropological project is one of 'sharing-in' through long-term field research and participant-observation in another culture and, subsequently 'sharing-out' in the ethnographic writing. This paper considers the ethnographer's challenge to 'share-out' with his or her reader the complex sensorimotor, enactive, and cognitive aspects of the field experience. The focus is upon conveying the sensorium in which the alien religion is enmeshed; the reservoir of 'likenesses' by which that religion conveys to its members what the experience of their membership should be actually like; and the narrative within which these likenesses are embedded and which are intended to capture the religious imagination of the adepts. The challenge to make the ethnography itself a convincing narrative is also considered. The conclusion avers that we cannot share what a religion *is* only what it is *like!*

The 'what-is-it-like-to-be-a' (WILTBA) question is particularly and perennially anthropological. Insofar as the anthropologist conceives of his project as being that of 'understanding' rather than 'explanation;' of 'taking the native's point of view' and not using things native as a way of advancing one or another western tradition of theorizing about society and culture. My own view, to be sure, is that the anthropologist has a foot in both camps and is constantly negotiating a hermeneutic circle between understanding and explanations, ethnography and ethnology. In this paper, however, I am glad to take up the challenge of our theme, "On Sharing Religious Experience," to reflect upon my efforts at ethnographic understanding of an African Religious Movement, Bwiti, which I studied in the late fifties and early sixties (Fernandez). I made a major effort in a long ethnography to share with the reader my understanding of what life in the equatorial forest and in this religious microcosm was like. I would like to reflect upon that effort as a method of sharing.

The 'what-it-is-like-to-be' question is particularly tested cross-culturally but its pertinence for humans is not limited to cross-cultural situations. It is a recurrent and an intriguing question that arises frequently within cultures, across classes or racial divisions, across the sexes. There is now

a whole genre of books — call it the Prince and the Pauper genre— written by members of one class, race or sex who have been able to 'pass' from that class, race or sex to another: a white man who has passed as a black in an American ghetto, an Israeli who passed as a Palestinian, a President of an American College who spent his summer vacations working at various menial lower-class occupations. And, of course, a driving theme in recent feminist literature, in the face of the dominant male or patriarchal definition of what human experience is like, is the attempt to 'share-out' women's experience to a patriarchal world; to see things, that is, in feminist terms and from a woman's perspective.

But this interest in 'what-it-is-like-to-be' is not limited to trying to be like other people of distinct sex, class or culture. Humans are and have been, since paleolithic times, fascinated with imagining 'what-it-like-to-be' members of another species. Paleolithic cave art gives us plenty of evidence of that. In modern times we recognize that there is a whole genre here — one that we particularly, though not exclusively, associate with children's literature. In English one can name one's own favourite. Presently in the United States the World Wildlife Fund, in cooperation with local wildlife groups, is seeking to enhance children's empathy with wild animals. For example, in an effort at 'sharing experience' with wolves, those unfortunately denigrated animals of folklore, children are blindfolded and allowed to wander in a garden full of diverse and various strong scents noticeable to humans. In this way they are encouraged to share the experience of possessing a 'sensory apparatus' primarily focused on olfactory cues.

So our 'thematic preoccupation' at this conference is by no means unique. The 'empathetic impulse,' to 'be like' or to 'share with' (if we can equate these for the moment), whatever its fruits, is old and widespread in human societies. Indeed we might argue that this kind of experiential ('that is to say cognitive and emotive') 'sharing' has gone hand in hand with that ancient sharing out of material resources that paleo-anthropologists identify as a distinctly human characteristic. So we have long had the capacity, and, thus, a concomitant desire to share. To be sure the sharing of material resources, on the one hand, and the sharing of experience, on the other, are two different things. It is one thing to share with others and thus know them through the exchange of material objects. It is quite another thing to share with others in the sense of 'knowing other minds.' That is a more problematic achievement and, indeed, that is why we are preoccupied with it here in this symposium.

Moving from the third to the first persons:
On sharing the Sensorium

Recalling the effort of The World Wildlife Fund to have children experience the particular sense (scents) of the world experienced by wolves puts us in mind of a relevant article in philosophy by Thomas Nagel titled "What is it like to be a Bat." Nagel writes about the problem of knowing other minds without knowing other mind's experiences of their own bodies. He evokes the implications for empathetic understanding of the mind-body problem.

Now the point about bats is that their sonar equipment is so unlike anything we possess that it is unlikely that we could ever know what it is like to be a bat.

Even without the benefit of philosophical reflection, anyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally *alien* form of life ... To the extent that I could look and behave like a wasp or a bat without changing my fundamental structure, my experiences would not be anything like the experiences of these animals. On the other hand, it is doubtful that any meaning can be attached to the supposition that I should possess the internal neurophysiological constitution of a bat. Even if I could by gradual degrees be transformed into a bat, nothing in my present constitution enables me to imagine what the experiences of such a future stage of myself thus metamorphosed would be like. The best evidence would come from the experiences of bats, if we only knew what they were like. (Nagel, 438-439)

Now Nagel goes on to argue that though we might describe in objective terms the auditory apparatus the bat possesses we cannot begin to conceptualize his or any other being's world unless we can take his 'point of view,' and taking his point of view involves apprehending what his sensory equipment is telling him where he is. For it is a particular sensory apparatus operating from a particular point of view which gives him the basis of his conceptions. An anthropologist would heartily agree with this emphasis on 'phenomenological subjectivity' and, indeed, it should be our main object, I would argue, to give as adequate an account as we can of the sense world in which our subjects act and think but which, and this is most important, is being processed from their 'point of view.'

There is a sense in which phenomenological facts are perfectly objective: one person can know or say of another what the quality of the other's experience is. They are subjective, however, in the sense that even this objective ascription of experience is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt his point of view — to understand the ascription in the first person as well as in the third, so to speak. (Nagel, 442)

colour slides and the auditory of selections from the Folkways record.

3. *The sharing of substances tasted, smelled, and reacted to:* The sharing of the gustatory and olfactory experiences of Bwiti or of any distant religious experience is more difficult for both logistic and technological reasons and because sight and sound, and not the gustatory and olfactory, are dominant modalities in our western cultures. I brought back the psychoreactive alkaloid 'eboga' with me in small amounts to share with those who might wish to taste or smell or experience the mind-altering effects of this substance. For obvious reasons this 'sharing' soon became problematic in the developing drug culture of our own in America. I also returned with *okoume* wands —used as incense in Bwiti—but have never burned them and they have been deposited in a museum collection.

But clearly these substances give one increased power to share the experience of Bwiti to those sensibly and mentally inclined to do so in a more complete way. Moreover it is hard to imagine sharing of the sensorium without acquainting one's interlocutor with the smell, and taste and subsequent effect upon the body of these substances.

LEVEL II Being There

1. *Revelatory incidents:* An ethnographer whose life in the field is usually full of events and incidents whose possible meaning in respect to his problems he must constantly ponder will be quickly convinced by the 'case method' of presenting his materials. This is a method whose intent is to share with the reader the dynamic in respect to persons and places of these events. I sought this sharing in Bwiti through the device of beginning every one of the 20 chapters with a 'Revelatory Incident' whose dynamic in respect to personages and 'points of view' I, then, sought to explain (I had framed the book in the Introduction with a long 'genealogy' of significant persons involved in village and religious life with whom I had lived in the field and something of whose personalities and problems I wished to convey to the reader). This method of seeking to involve the reader with the revelatory incidents of the field and, to that extent, share with him or her the field experience itself also applied to religious experience. In Part III of the book I selected various inci-

dents related to Bwiti ceremonial in which the reader might share some feeling for the ceremonial process and its problems. These revelatory incidents were designed, in short, to enable the reader as much as possible to 'be there' in the ongoing ethnographic task and to share in the ethnographer's efforts to, himself, more closely share the problematic world of the Banzie.

2. *Figures of understanding:* Perhaps the most important way (as far as my particular (tropological) theoretical perspective is concerned) by which I sought to share the experience of the Bwiti religion was through close attention to the various devices by which the Banzie 'figured' their religion: that is to say the various tropes that they employed in their sermons, songs, mythology, theology and religious casuistry. It is true to say about human understanding that 'by indirections we find directions out.' We often understand something best by bringing something else analogous —something else we understand better— to bear upon it. This involves the use of the various tropes. In an oral culture particularly and even more in religion, surely, where we are dealing with the 'ineffable' we must take these figures of understanding very seriously indeed. For in the face of so many things that the Banzie themselves do not understand very well it is their way of telling themselves 'what-it-is-like-to-be-a-member of Bwiti.' And we take note, once again, that it is 'what it is *like*' not what it is to be a member that, by focusing on figurative devices, we are sharing with our readers and auditors.

This distinction between 'what it is *like*' and 'what it *is*' to be, built into the very title of our argument here, raises the questions of 'knowing other minds' in any objective way. It is the question treated by Nagel with the hopeful expectation of a phase change in that capacity of knowing. But those of us engaged in fieldwork among 'others' and obliged to (and desirous of) sharing that fieldwork cannot put aside that obligation to await such a phase change. What we can do now is be attentive to how others share with themselves an understanding of the meaning of their experiences by trying to say what their experiences are *like* rather than what they *are*. That is to say, we can attend to their experience by showing how they bring, synesthetically, experiences, very often, from other sense modalities to bear upon lacunae in their understanding.

Let me give just a few examples from Bwiti of the way the Banzie use various images to argue to themselves what it is like to be a Banzie.²

Images of the earth and undergrowth abound in Bwiti 'evangiles.' Clay and swamp and fens appear, and men are lost in the leaves of the underbrush and wander unable to see each other, let alone their tutelary supernatural. In such a context, it is apt that the speaker compares the Bwiti chapel to the hunter's bower of leaves in the deep forest. For within this spiritual 'bower' men can become, as he suggests, like cross-bows, tensed to 'shoot' their souls to the above. (Fernandez, 499)

Two {images} must be further explained: the reference to tobacco and to the light of the mirror. The smoking of tobacco (sometimes hemp) is employed in chapels of Bwiti to represent the distillation of the spirit out of its corporeal substance and its rising to the 'above.' Often the reference to tobacco occurs, though not in the sermon, in relation to the forging of the body in the ritual activity of the chapel — its reinvestiture with spirit upon its rebirth in Bwiti. But smoking is an image with opposite implications here, for it implies the destruction or burning down of the body and the divestiture of spirit. (Fernandez, 515)

LEVEL III Sharing through the Narration of Experience

1. *Bwiti narratives:* If it is true that it is characteristically human to tend to understand and share the meaning of difficult things by bringing other things they understand better to bear upon them —by understanding something else as it were— it is also true to say that humans often best understand who they are and what they are about by telling stories to themselves and to each other about themselves. Story telling, often enough, is simply a more extended way of trying to understand one thing by telling about something else: 'thereby hangs a tale' as it is said. Religion, particularly, because it treats of the ineffable —the non-empirical, on the

² The ethnography, Bwiti, makes extensive reference throughout to 'the argument of images' going on among Fang involved in this religion. For a more focused argument see, however, J. W. Fernandez, "The Argument of Images and the Experience of Returning to the Whole," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, V. Turner and E. Bruner, eds., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986, pp. 159-17.

one hand, and subtle moral casuistry on the other —is full of the sharing of narration.

Fang and Banzie, thus, share experience with each other not only by the use of analogies but also by means of stories they tell each other about themselves. We can share in their experience by carefully transcribing these narratives. Thus in Bwiti we took special care to transcribe and comment upon these narratives: The narratives of family and village migration attached to the genealogies (Chapter 3); the narratives of first contact with the European (Chapter 4); the narratives of culture defining myths and legends, the stories, that is, they tell themselves about themselves before the arrival of the Europeans (Chapter 2); the narratives of initiatory narcotic excursions and dreams that confirm one's identity as a Banzie. (Chapter 18)

These latter narratives involving the sharing of recondite religious experience are of particular interest to our topic here. These narcotic excursions are thought to be such private and mysterious matters —although, in fact, they tend to be stereotyped in the act of narration— that it is felt to be necessary for the initiate to recount the specifics of his drug-induced experiences to the leadership in order to confirm their propitiousness for the interests of the group. 'Sharing' is crucial here not only because the drugged excursion is otherwise a wholly private matter but also because it is likely to be coopted by any of the multitudinous malevolent forces in the universe against which Bwiti is struggling. The narration of these narcotic dreams of initiation is a way of assuring against ego-centric malevolence and confirming group purpose. If the Banzie were to be asked why they so desire to share this particular religious experience, they would reply that it was to prevent ego-centric forces from appropriating their religion and to assure themselves that theirs is a shared religion and not a private ego-centric relation between an adept and supernatural power.

2. *Bwiti as a narrative:* Here I want to treat briefly the entire set of rituals in Bwiti as a narrative, on the one hand, and the ethnographer's task to provide for his reader a convincing narrative ethnography, on the other. For clearly any representation of another religion, even a representation of its narratives, must be more than a compilation of facts or of narratives. It must be a narrative itself. If one is to effectively share one must work to narrate in an interesting way the revelatory incidents, or the translations of myth, legend and genealogical narratives one wishes to present. But if the

reader is to really share what is achieved in a culture, and particularly a religious culture, one must also give the entire ethnographic presentation convincing narrative form. And it is also a narrative that must in some way relate to local religious narrative.

My view of the overall narrative of the Bwiti religion was that the Banzie in the succession of rituals, songs and dances that they call *The Road of Birth and Death*, were seeking to overcome or transcend the malaise of Life which is Death in its various forms and obtain to permanent ancestral status. In the ethnography I sought to offer, relating to this overarching narrative in Bwiti, a resurrection narrative in three parts: a narrative of cultural decline (Part I), a narrative of liminal meditation about culture (Part II), and a narrative of cultural revitalization or resurrection (Part III). It was a narrative, in other words, of margination-separation, transition and reintegration.

This ethnographic narrative involved numerous images but two dominant images were fundamental: from the Western perspective, *The Road to Xanadu*, the Coleridgean path image based on the poem by the same name, and from the Fang perspective, *The Path of Birth and Death*, a fundamental organizing image, as we have said, in the Banzie experience. Part of the task of enabling those foreign to a religious culture to share its experiences is to endeavour to present the images that are present in that culture and its members' minds and which are present during ritual action or which act to guide these activities. But sharing also involves finding cognate images in our own culture which can serve as a guide to the understanding of these 'other' images. *The Road to Xanadu* is an instance of one of these cognate images which can, in its similarity and its differences, enable us to bridge over and thus share in that 'other image.'

Conclusion

If we are to believe the paleo-anthropologists sharing is an ancient human capacity . . . and humans are characteristically interested in sharing not only materially but spiritually as well. That is to say we are interested not only in the exchange of objects but also in the exchange of experiences. But the problems of fully sharing in the latter mode are very great indeed, particularly if we envision it as a process of coming to know other minds in any objective way that does not involve substituting our subjective experience for theirs. For the ethnographer the strategy must be a modest one of seeking to approximate to the knowing of other minds by trying to carefully register: (1) the sensorium in which these

other minds are enmeshed; (2) the revelatory incidents in their lives in which their identities and the problematics of their lives are at play; (3) the analogies by which they 'figure out' for themselves what their experiences are *like*; and (4) the narratives that they recount to each other in an effort to compose their experiences and capture each others imaginations. In the end the most we can probably hope for from this strategy of ethnographic sharing is being able to understand what it is *like* not what it *is* to be a member of another religious culture. Perhaps, finally, this is only to recognize the meaning of the word *share*: that is, to be able to have some part but never the whole of another's stake in things material or mental.

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