

Reflections on looking into mirrors

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Half asleep (on the plane) I looked out into the night and saw my father's face looking in squinting, trying to see something. I sat up. But of course it was my own face, my reflection in the glass squinting, trying to see something looking out.

Michael J. Arlen *Passage to Ararat*.

In this room a mirror has been hung in the background in order to duplicate the distance of observation. If we look at the floor it is easy to persuade ourselves that it is a continuation of the one we occupy as spectators ... the sensation of relief is absolute.

A. J. Onieva *The Prado Gallery: A Museum Guide* — Comment on Velasquez' 'Las Meninas'

The ancestor in everyman¹

On my passage out to Equatorial Africa in 1958 I had occasion to pass through Madrid and return once again to visit the Prado. I there spent, like so many visitors, considerable time in the room devoted to the famous picture by Velasquez, 'Las Meninas' (The Ladies in Waiting).² In this picture there is a subtle play of mirrors both within the picture and by means of an actual large mirror set up in the small room entirely devoted to the canvas. The trick — the duplicity — in the duplication of mirrors is to persuade the observer that he is part of the scene figured, a gathering of the Spanish royal family. I have always had difficulty in suspending the disbelief of visual, not to mention social and historical distance, long enough to enjoy this effect. And, contrary to the claims of the guidebook, the sensation of relief I experienced was that of leaving the room and my frustrating efforts to get into the gestalt of the thing — to feel my speculating figure grounded, as it were, in the royal chambers of Philip the Fourth. One could even, and I suppose that this is the main available sensation, be identified with the royal couple themselves. For it is they who are reflected in the mirror in the painting in such a way as to seem to

be occupying the position of the spectator. If the trick works, and I am told that it often does, the mirror should show the king and queen in every man and woman.

These frustrations in obtaining objective self-awareness in a seventeenth century scene may account for the exceptional interest I subsequently took in a feature of initiation into the Mbiri-Bwiti religious movement complex among the Fang of western Equatorial Africa.³ Initiation into this movement is achieved by the ingestion of large amounts of the psychotropic plant, *eboga* (*Tabernenthe eboga*).⁴ The visionary excursions produced by higher levels of dosage are sufficient unto themselves in many chapels. But often the initiation is aided by placing a mirror on the ground some six to eight feet directly before the initiate, who is also sitting spread-legged upon the ground. Sometimes the mirror will carry a design in white paint, an 'X' or a facelike configuration, and sometimes it will be unmarked. It is never so completely marked that the initiate cannot make out his own face reflected in the mirror.

A significant moment in initiation comes when the initiate, now deeply under the influence of *eboga*, recognizes his or her ancestor or troubling spirit in the virtual image of the mirror. He recognizes *Bwiti*, as it is said. It is a moment of singular import, for the initiate may well have been staring intently, often leaning forward in a strained position, for several hours. What was his or her face or an ambiguous mark becomes transformed into the significant other with whom the religion or curing cult is seeking to come into communication. When the other is finally seen — there is always some question whether the initiation will work — the relief is indeed absolute. The initiate, his initiation confirmed by this manifestation, can now pass on to a new state of being — that of incumbent of the chapel or 'angel' (*Banzie*). Having seen the ancestor, the initiate can now be removed to a chamber outside the ceremonial arena where, stupefied and soon falling asleep, he can continue his visionary excursion in the land of the dead.⁵

Inevitably there are various explanations for this phase of the initiation. Some members of these movements say that the ancestor or afflicting spirit has come directly into the mirror out of the ground. Others say that the ancestor simply manifests himself in the mirror. Others say that the event is indicative of the stage in the ingestion of *eboga* in which the initiate can no longer see the things of this world. One subtle-minded informant said that the initiate was really seeing himself but that this was what the religion was really all about — the enabling of one to see oneself more clearly, more at a distance as it were. The self-objectification by means of a mirror to which this informant seems to be referring is compatible, incidentally, with the sense of distancing from self — or at

least the sense of observing one's own body from a distance — produced as a psychoreaction to the *eboga* plant,⁶ which as Bwitists say produces the sense of 'I am here and my body is there'.

In any event, no member offered the explanation which I think is the most fruitful one: this is the explanation that the trick of the mirror accomplished an identification of the dead ancestor behind the looking glass and the living descendant before it. If there was not an identification, there was at least a recognition that the one and the other were reflections of each other — a condition essentially true for cultures like the Fang which emphasize genealogical continuities between the living and the dead and reject any sense of pronounced discontinuity.⁷ Indeed, these religious movements are seeking to reestablish continuities between the living and the dead — continuities disturbed by the missionary attack upon the immanence of ancestors and by other secularizing and depersonalizing processes of the colonial world. More than the colonial, perhaps it is the modern world! For these processes of 'discontinuity' surely were at work on Michael Arlen, to refer to our other epigraph, animating him to fly back to Ararat in search of his Armenian ancestry. And his is only the most notable of much recent literature in search of 'ethnic communion'.

African uses of mirrors and other reflecting surfaces

There is precedence for this use of mirrors in western Equatorial Africa. Among Fang themselves mirrors were sometimes used in ancestral cult initiations ... after, however, rather than before collapse from hallucinatory drug taking. (In the Fang ancestral cult the plant was not *Tabernenthe eboga* but *Alchornea floribunda malan*.) When the initiate had collapsed, he was rushed from the village into the forest precincts and revived. Behind him the skulls of the ancestors were taken out of the reliquaries and placed on a platform. When the initiate was sufficiently revived, he was propped up before a mirror in such a way as to see the skulls reflected in it. He would later be shown the skulls directly and he would participate in their washing. It was felt that if he were first directly shown the skulls the shock would be too great. In point of fact, the reflection of the skulls in the mirrors seems to have had more psychological effect than direct viewing.

The use of mirrors for religious purposes along the equatorial west coast has been long remarked, particularly among the Loango or Bavili (Pechuel Loesch 1907 passim; Dennet 1906: 30, 51, 84), where magical mirrors were used by diviners and where the light thrown from mirrors was felt to have grievous consequences. Reliquary and other religious

figurines often had bits of mirrors embedded in them with the intention, very likely, of protecting them and adding to their power. Trilles (1932: 178–180) argues that the origin of this mirror use may well lie with the pygmies and their use of the magic mirror (although surely mirror use in this part of Africa must be traced to very early contact with Europeans as well as to the belief that the dead dwelt at the bottom of streams, lakes, and pools — behind or beneath reflective surfaces, as it were). Among western equatorial pygmies Trilles says the mirror was used in divination in order to conjure up the more or less distinct physiognomy of the guilty party, the enemy of the patient. The face would be less distinct because the pygmies employed a polished piece of copper. Before the acquisition of this metal they employed a very still pool of water deep in the forest — *fontaine des esprits* — for reflective divination. This practice is reinterpreted in the Bwiti religion, which regards such deep forest pools as the sites where the souls of the newborn are first sent before they are conceived in the womb. Pebbles representing souls are fished out of these pools and transported into the chapel house. Fang have long believed that the essential self is seen in water reflection (Tessman 1913: II.35), particularly in still pools.

Trilles also discusses the consecration of the pygmy mirror. It is consecrated to the sun, which sees everything, and some of whose all-seeing light is confined in the mirror for future use. But there is surprisingly little ethnographic data on the use of mirrors from elsewhere in Africa. Since the earliest use of mirrors seems to have been in Egypt, there has long been opportunity for diffusion into the rest of Africa. This opportunity is enhanced by widespread Islamic beliefs — similar to those in Europe — that the mirror image is the embodiment of the soul and hence to be avoided, particularly at times of funerals when one's own soul might be stolen away by the departing. Among Zulu, who divined traditionally by dark reflecting pools and who regarded, it is said (Calloway 1868: 342ff), any reflecting surface with respect if not awe, the custom still persists of covering or turning mirrors to the wall during lightning storms, lest the mortal bolt of such a supernatural event be reflected directly into living quarters. There was also the belief among Zulu and other southern Nguni that a mirror properly adjusted to reflect the heavens could kill enemy warriors.

There is plentiful evidence for the use of mirrors elsewhere in the world, particularly in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, as well as in aboriginal America. Among the Plains Indians, for example, mirror boards were used in war expeditions to make the bearer as difficult to capture or injure as light from a mirror, and latterly they were employed in the Sun Dance and Ghost Dance (Kroeber 1907: 356). A review of the folk

literature motifs involving mirrors gathered by Stith Thompson (1958 Index Volume: 509) shows worldwide provenience from Japan through Siberia to Iceland. The mirror apparently, perhaps because of the 'trickiness' we discuss below, is a device which easily becomes a repository of significance — a collective representation. But what it represents is, characteristically, variable from culture to culture. Thus in English, French, Welsh, and Italian folktales the devil appears when a woman looks at herself in a mirror after sunset. In Jewish tales, the same theme is transformed and the mirror acts as a chastity index justly reflecting the degree of a woman's devilishness. Similarly, while in the English tradition a broken mirror is an evil omen, in Armenia and Japan a mirror gradually grows dark as an individual's life prospects dim. In either case the state of the mirror is tied up with the fate, health, and future of the person whom it reflects. Thus God or Saint Peter or other 'weighers of souls' can make use of a mirror on the judgment day. For it will faithfully reflect the virtues or vices of the spectator's life.

The mirror's self-sufficient tricks also provoke the playful or absurd in folktales: tales where characters stand in front of a mirror with their eyes shut to see how they look when they are asleep or where they take mirrors to bed to see if they sleep with their mouths open. In cabalistic thought there are the seven mirrors for each day of the week, dedicated to each of the seven planets. Having different reflective surfaces, they are consulted for different purposes. Tuesday's Mars mirror of iron is consulted as to imminent enmities and lawsuits. Friday's Venus mirror of copper is consulted as to questions of love.

Of course, the literature and folklore of exploration and western expansion is replete with accounts of native amusement or amazement upon first setting eyes on European mirrors — pocket reflecting pools as they must have seemed. But this literature, often quite elaborated, lacks ethnographic value and may reflect, as much as anything, the mirroring effect that Europeans themselves were encountering amidst strangely familiar men and women in barbarous climes.

The mirror's tricks

Mirrors play at least two tricks. They reverse the horizontal plane while maintaining the vertical and they give the see-through effect. That is, they locate, as anyone who has tried to photograph a mirror knows, the virtual image as far back of the mirror, apparently, as the objects in view are in front of it. These tricks act to create an interesting arousal and state of wonder, susceptible, as we see, to a wide variety of cultural uses. One may