

# Edification by Puzzlement

by James Fernandez

By indirections find directions  
out!

POLONIUS  
He gives me ideas even when I  
don't understand him.

E. LEACH ON C. LÉVY-STRAUSS

## Administered Intellectuality

The colonial mentality is generally associated with a set of racial attitudes produced in a privileged class of administrative, merchant, or sometimes, missionary plenipotentiaries well suited to justify and preserve privileges and exclude the claims of the administered peoples upon those privileges. These attitudes most often were expressed in observations on the moral behavior of native peoples such as their irresponsibility and deviousness or their lack of the more refined feelings. But the colonial mentality was also a set of beliefs about mentality itself. These beliefs were most often expressed in observations on "time sense," childishness, or prelogical reasoning. To the very end of the colonial period, colonialists bewailed the granting of independence to local peoples who wouldn't have the wits to run things, whether it was the Suez Canal—these days it has been the Panama Canal, one of the last outposts of the colonial attitude in its purest form—the Kariba Dam, the Katanga copper mines, or the Ghana Cocoa Marketing Board. Of course, all these constructions are still running, although perhaps not in their former manner. Not all peoples have the gift of the northern European peoples for self-abnegating administration. Most peoples tend to express themselves more by administering and maintaining structures of exchange and control.

The point of this postcolonial preamble is not to deny that there are differences in mentalities or in modes of thought. Indeed, there are, and we should be interested in them. But on the other hand, we should always be wary of the imperial impulse—the possibility that every interest in mentalities is betrayed by a *petitio principii*, a preexis-

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tent interest in maintaining and justifying a structure of privileges. It is perfectly natural to seek to maintain privileges, but this is not the purpose of anthropology, which seeks some simple knowledge of the species which surpasses our impressive capacity for self-interested and self-contained activity.

This caution is by no means over drawn. I remember when I administered the Segall, Campbell, Herskovits visual illusions protocol in a Fang village in Gabon.<sup>1</sup> Now I had good rapport in that village. I carried a local name. I came as a bachelor and later captured a wife, a North European wife at that, and brought her to the village—a palpable strengthening of the lineage. But that was a difficult protocol to administer. On the one hand I seemed to be getting a lot of extraneous answers, and on the other hand several of the younger villagers seemed mistrustful. It was during the De Gaulle Referendum, and politics were a strong interest among the young. For whom was I doing the protocol? they wanted to know. And what reason did I have for wanting to know such things? Admittedly those kinds of questions and the "laboratory" type conditions required of the test administration were much different from my customary participant-observer and notes and queries role. That role was more fitted to the reason I had given for being in the village, that is, to do a history of the Fang way of life and to make it known to "esi merika," the land of the Americans. The protocol was a harder-headed social science, to use terms from the hard-soft continuum which is a favorite metaphor in academic life. Some of the villagers sensed it as such, although most admittedly took such things as the Sander parollegram and the Miller-Lyer illusion as just a peculiar kind of riddling popular to Europeans.

I had to admit, if not to my interlocutors, at least to myself, that the harder-headed social science was more highly regarded in my country than the softer kind I usually practiced. In part this was because the culture of science prefers hard data to soft data, but also in part because that harder data was more useful to those hard-headed people who sought, if not to maintain a world system of privileges, at least to engage in competent tough-minded administration of world order. It is of interest, incidentally, to note that the most fruitful and well-funded psychological testing, that of the Rockefeller ethnographic psychology team, has found a congenial field laboratory in Liberia, a country whose administration is quite interested in maintaining a well-ordered system of inherited privileges. I have no doubt that it is

quite coincidental as far as the Rockefeller team is concerned. These days one does social and psychological science where one can.

The difficult questions raised by my young informants must be answered. We have some obligations when, as Geertz (1973) says, we plague subtle peoples with obtuse questions. Why, really, are those who sponsor that research really interested in sponsoring it? Is disinterested inquiry as widespread as we would like it to be? Fang respondents were not so optimistic and trusting as I was about the scientific neutrality of the protocol.

The Rockefeller ethnographic psychology team under Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner has been conducting studies of the impact of literacy on rural Liberians. These are valuable studies concerning memory, the ability to recall, pattern recognition, and perception.<sup>2</sup> They have also been attempting to get hard data on that perennial bugaboo, logical thought process. This they have been doing by administering a series of protocols which employ that old reasoning device: the syllogism. Here are some examples from West African and Mexican protocols.

All people who own huts pay hut tax.

Boima does not pay a hut tax.

Does Boima own a hut?

So that Jose can carry corn from his farm to

the town, he needs a cart and a horse.

He has the horse but he doesn't have the cart.

Can Jose carry his corn from his farm?

The results of administering these syllogisms support a number of generalizations: 1) in all cultures populations designated as "traditional" have a just somewhat better than chance solution rate; 2) within each culture there is a large discrepancy in performance between schooled and non-schooled; 3) within schooling there is little between-culture variation in performance—grade in school, rather than society, is most determinate of performance.<sup>3</sup> The results seem to be that schools teach you to solve syllogisms. They are a particular genre, a kind of lore, as it were, typical of that milieu. If you haven't been to school you won't be clued in on the need to suspend disbelief in order to accept the propositions. You have to be schooled to accept Boima's or Jose's hypothetical plight as real. You also have to be schooled to

the fact that you don't have to search elsewhere for a solution to such questions. The answer to the question posed in the syllogism is found in the syllogism itself; it is self-contained.

Now what is most interesting, it seems to me, are the ways in which traditional rural peoples go wrong, that is, fall into logical errors in respect to conjunction, disjunction, and implication. When responding to these syllogisms, rural peoples, since they aren't schooled enough in the self-sufficiency of the syllogism itself, most often introduce new personal evidence. This is not surprising, Sylvia Scribner gives many examples of the way informants question the facts: "We don't carry corn in carts." "We don't pay hut taxes here!" In other cases they are stimulated into elaborate personal accounts recalling experiences relevant to the subject matter of the question, though not to the requirements of the syllogism.

What seems to occur is that these rural uneducated subjects tend to ignore the arbitrarily imposed relations among the elements in the problem and the rules of criterion implied. They tend to "go beyond the information given" and give consideration to the context in which the question is posed, such as the colonial context of domination and subordination evoked by my younger Fang visual illusion informants or the cultural context of the question—corn is not carried in carts, and not all huts are taxed. They creatively introduce personal experiences and use these academic riddles as an opportunity for edifying commentary on life in general. Or they simply introduce new evidence. Once you take the premises of the new evidence into account, the reasoning of these people turns out to be quite logical. Scribner calls this kind of reasoning "empiric" explanation as opposed to the theoretic or "schooled" explanation of syllogistic argument. Rather than fulfill a formal task, the respondent seeks concrete examples and particular correlative circumstances. Informants either reject the information given or verify it by imputing new evidence.

Lancy, who has worked with the Cole-Scribner ethnographic psychology team and encountered the same problem (the tendency of rural nonwesterners to ignore the rules involved and to answer in terms of setting and personal involvements) points out that responses to the syllogisms are like a certain kind of riddle solving found among Kpelle. There is no single right answer to these riddles. Rather, as the riddle is posed to a group, the right answer is the one among many offered that seems most illuminating, resourceful, and convincing as deter-

mined by consensus and circumstance.<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on edification as a criterion for "rightness" is found in Kpelle jurisprudence as well. The successful litigant is the one who can make the most resourceful and edifying argument. The argument is not simply the application of a set of legal rules, but involves taking a problem situation as a personal opportunity to explore the context of the problem and its relevant precedents. Application of a perceived rule is not nearly so important as is availing oneself of the opportunity of a puzzlement—those latent possibilities for the expression of verbal and intellectual skills found in any riddle. The well-schooled are much more anxious about right answers and develop heuristics, formulas for rule applications, to obtain them.

There are various kinds of riddles, but on balance, I think it is a mistake to see riddles as simply an exercise in the application of academic rules. It is certainly a mistake to say that "a riddle is always closer to an academic test than to creative research" as Köngas Maranda (1971:296) has argued. Indeed it is the main point of this paper—and edifying consequences in the more traditional non-schooled societies.

#### Images and Answers

Just the same, Köngas Maranda's work on riddles is some of the most interesting we have, and it is important to recall the main points of her analyses. Köngas Maranda's work is important because she shows that the riddle is really an enigmatic metaphor that follows the logical structure of metaphors and metonyms. Like all tropes, a riddle is the statement of a relation between or within sets (or domains of objects). Like lively poetic metaphor in contrast to dead or unprovoking metaphor, a riddle offers a fresh point of view. Köngas Maranda, in fact, contradicts her notion that riddles are not creative: "... that is it causes us to see connections between things that we had not previously perceived." In a Durkheimian manner Köngas Maranda suggests that the final referent of riddles is to some basic aspect of human behavior—a kind of language in which a group speaks of its most basic social action—the union of man and woman. This may be why so many riddles, incidentally, deal with sexual innuendo. In any event, riddles perform a union or conjunction of separated entities on the cognitive level that on the physical level is one of the species' pri-

mary preoccupations. Riddles therefore necessarily consist of two parts which are to be conjoined—the riddle image and the answer. These must be analyzed together, though a tendency in riddle analysis has been to concentrate on the image itself.

This conjunction of image and answer in the riddle follows the old Aristotelian definition of an analogy. Analogy exists whenever there are four terms such that the relation between the second and the first is similar to that between the fourth and the third.

$$A/B \quad \text{as} \quad C/D$$

Now any kind of reasoning by tropes—by analogy—rests on two kinds of connection between phenomena: similarity (the metaphoric relation) and contiguity (the metonymic relation). In terms of this Aristotelian formula the similarity relationship runs across sets and the contiguity relation within sets:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{metonym} \\ \left[ \begin{array}{ccc} A & & C \\ / & & / \\ B & & D \end{array} \right] \text{metaphor} \end{array}$$

This is better written since we are dealing within sets and across sets relations,  $A/a$  as  $C/c$ , where  $A$  is the human body and  $C$  is, let us say, the ocean. In metaphor we are given the analogy by being given both sides of the equation. The arm,  $a$ , is to the human body as an extended inlet,  $c$ , is to the ocean, hence the arm of the ocean. In a riddle, however, we are only given one side of the equation, say the body side, and we have to discover the other side. Perhaps we are given only the body side and have to discover the other natural object or manufactured object side. Let me send the reader on a riddle-provoked ramble of discovery.

Riddle a diddle, unravel my riddle:

"Long legs, sharp thighs, no neck, big eyes."

This riddle gives you the body or natural side, but you must busy yourself to discover the cultural side.<sup>5</sup>

Now all analogies—and riddles are analogies par excellence—have the capacity to establish or suggest connections between experiences within domains and between domains. They are cognitively integrating as it were, and in that way they are edifying. This is basically what I mean by edification: the cognitive construction by suggestion of a

larger integration of things, a larger whole. Whereas we customarily discriminate and separate between animate and inanimate objects or draw contrasts between nature and culture, these puzzling predications suggest similarities between, in this case, the human body and a pair of scissors.

Now the very act of suggesting these similarities and noting these contiguities is edifying because the equation between the two sets of experience rests on the fact that both can be shown to belong to a set greater than the two original sets in analogous comparison. Kõngas Maranda calls this greater set a *superset*; Keith Basso calls it paradigmatic integration. I have been calling this transcendence.<sup>6</sup> In the case of our riddle, the equation between leggy people and scissors suggests the transcendent superset which we may call the set or domain of articulated things. Though part of the pleasure in metaphor rests in its suggestion of a relation between things thought to be separate if not opposite, at the same time the metaphor or the riddle-metaphor builds a bridge across the abyss of separated, discriminated experience. Jakobson (1960) has argued that before there can be a sense of similarity there must be a sense of contiguity. This is true within sets brought into analogous relation—for we must be clear about the relationship of parts within domains before we can suggest similarities between domains. At the same time, out of the sense of similarities is produced a transcendent overarching sense of contiguity. This transformation of contiguities into similarities and similarities into contiguities is fundamentally edifying. And it is what Lévi-Strauss (1966) means when he speaks with (mysterious) edifying puzzlement about the transformation of metaphors into metonyms and vice versa.

In any event, I would argue, in contrast to Kõngas Maranda, that it is this edification of a more integrated world view that is the prime and typical function of this puzzlement. It is not primarily the well-situated discovery and application of rules done in order to find the right answers. Kõngas Maranda tends to understand riddles too much in terms of the intellectual efforts of Western school days. There are, it is true, riddling situations in which these puzzles would qualify as what she calls "true riddles." They demand a scanning of the riddle images (or image) for the coded message, i.e., the relevant metonymic relation, in order to discover the right answer, i.e., that relation in another domain. My experience in African riddling situations, however, suggests a prevalence of what she calls the "monk's riddles": riddles that either have a rote answer which one repeats like a catechism or

riddles in which there are felt to be a plurality of possible answers and in which the object is creative resourcefulness in providing an answer. Or they are riddles in which no answer is expected from the riddler. The edification is implicit. The audience is left to ponder for itself the mysterious connections between things which are established or implied by the riddles. The riddles here constitute an ambiguous stimulus for creative and constructive responses. They are not instruments designed to provoke the detection and application of certain rules.

This kind of reasoning by the puzzle of analogy is a mode of thought congenial to the older and more holistic societies because it is serviceable to members of these societies returning to "a sense of the whole" of which they are a part and in which they are ideally to be incorporated. Such reasoning recurrently takes place in these societies. Analysis into parts is not really so important in these societies as is the periodic construction or reconstruction of the whole. The whole is what is truly edifying, and its reconstruction is a purpose which puzzlement can subtly serve.

#### Cosmogony by Puzzlement

I have seen this kind of reasoning in an African religious movement: Bwiti among the Fang of western equatorial Africa. This is a movement that is providentially trying to return the membership to the whole world in which the ancestors lived and from which the colonial situation has separated them. I became aware of that objective because of a recurrent dictum used by one of the leaders of a main branch of Bwiti, Ekang Engono of Kongoulen. He frequently said "the world is one thing but the witches try to isolate men from each other so they can eat them!" By what are called "likenesses" in Fang this leader sought to knit the world together—to cosmogonize. I should like to examine some of the ways by which this edification proceeds by looking at what the people of Bwiti, the Banzi, call Engono's "miraculous words." Various devices are employed in his sermons, these "subtle words."<sup>7</sup> For example, though the sermons or *evangiles* are neither didactic nor expository—they seem spontaneous and free-associative in the extreme—they can obtain a kind of integrity by "playing on roots." Thus, the root *yen*, "to see," is bound into different morphemes several different times in an *evangile*. For example, in a sermon of only five minutes in length we find the root, *yen*, "to see," coming up four different times bound into different words. The word *play* is,

basically, between *yena*, "mirror," and *Eyene*, "he who sees." *Eyene* is the word for the savior figure of this religion, but he is also seen as a mirror who reflects the actions of mankind and whose nature mankind ought to reflect. One other key term in this brief sermon plays with the root: *enyenge*, a deep forest pool in which one sees one's reflection. It is Bwiti belief that not only do men and women see their own faces reflected in these pools, but the sky and the sky deities are also reflected in them. There is in the congregation, in any case, an expectancy gratified by the reiteration of these roots. That reiteration is one source of the sermon's integrity.

In order to get the flavor of these puzzling sermons, I will comment upon selected paragraphs from one of them. More than simply providing for its own integrity by playing on roots and recurrent elemental images, these sermons are designed to suggest an integrity in the religious world in which Bwiti seek to dwell:

1. This thing which I recount is no longer. Zame made us first out upon the savannah. And it was he that pierced and prepared our way through the giant adzap tree. And it was he that began to make it possible to make things of the forest. For Fang are of the forest.
2. Humankind shows four miracles. First he leaves the ground and comes to the foot. And he leaves there and comes to the calf. Then he leaves there and comes to the knee. Then he leaves there and is perched upon whence he came. On the shoulders he is put into the balance for the first time.
3. One fans in vain the cadaver in this earth of our birth. The first bird began to fly in the savannah. The night Cain slew Abel the people built the village of Melen. And after that they never turned back. What we Banzie call *Eloidi Tsenge*, Fang call rainbow, and Europeans call *arc-en-ciel*. It was raised over the people. Then they passed through the adzap tree. Then they used the forest to construct things. That was the time of the Oban invasion from the north, the Oban of Olu Menyege.
4. The land of humankind was formed and it is a drop of blood. And that drop grew big and round until the white of the egg was complete and prepared, covering two egg sacks within: the white sack and the black sack. That is the ball of birth and of the earth.
5. Now Fang say that "the star is suspended there high up above." The fruit of the adzap tree is suspended up there high in the adzap. What is found suspended there between these things? Why, it is the raindrop. And that raindrop is the congregation—the group of Banzie.

6. The first food of mankind was the sugar cane, therefore the child takes and presses in his mouth the sweet fruit of the breast. It was Ndong Zame of legend who took up the wheeling ways of children. We are children of the rainbow because we are made of clay.

11. Nyinywan Mebege she is the oil palm. Zame ye Mebege he is the olunga tree. And he died and it is the same as the story of the widow of the forest who conceived on the day her husband died. And she conceived on the day her husband died. And she gave birth in the spreading roots of the adzap tree. They were the first stool. And the adzap we know dries up and dies when sorcerers climb into its branches. And we Fang began at the adzap but we set out quickly from under the adzap tree. Then Zame sat upon the stool and gave his child Eyene Zame. That stool is the olunga and it is also a cross. Adzap-mboga is the road of death. And the first stool, the adzap, was the door to death.

17. The ligaments of the small green bird who cries like boiling water they tie together the earth. Woman has the pierced adzap tree below. Man holds the adzap tree up above. And thus is life tied together. Zame makes life with two materials: the drumming stick is the male. The drum is the female.

As will be seen (the sermons themselves are not explained to the congregation), the interpretation of these midnight sermons requires reference to experiences otherwise acquired in Fang culture. As in a riddle, the images of these sermons send us elsewhere to obtain our answers. They are rich in images which must, however, be contextualized by extension into various domains of Fang culture. The interpretive task is, therefore, to move back and forth between text and context. And while this must always be the case with any interpretation of a text, there is here a much greater obligation to contextualize in order to find meaning due to the lack of expository or didactic aids. There is edification—an emergent sense of a larger meaningful whole—in being so obliged to seek for meaning in the cultural context. Such puzzling sermons, by condensing in one unitary presentation many diverse domains of Fang cultural experience, suggest in that experience an integrity, a relatedness, that Fang in recent years have been at risk of losing. At the same time, by forcing contextualization on the auditor, the cultural experience he is obliged to extend his interpretation to and consult is revitalized. This relating of the parts and revitalizing of the whole of a cultural context is cosmogony of an important kind.

These sermons are examples of what Vygotzky (1962) has called

"thinking in complex." The sequence of images—the body images, the forest images, the vital liquids images, the suspended things images, the food images—put forth are not dominated by any overall conceived and stated purpose or by any dominant image. The materials presented cluster around a complex—a sequence of organizing images. These recur, but none is prevailingly nuclear. New materials from various domains of Fang experience are introduced on the basis of association by similarity or contiguity, contrast, or complementarity with this sequence. But then again, abruptly, new elements with all their alternatives are allowed to enter the thought process and raise new thematic preoccupations—and to suggest new possible nuclei of attention. By any standard of administered intellectuality, such sermons seem diffuse and spontaneous in the extreme.

And yet as the sermonizer promises, they "tie together" what brotherly enmity and witchcraft has torn asunder. By a sequence of "likenesses" he shows that the world, fallen into devilish particularities, is really one thing. For the sequence of images is in no way directly or explicitly linked, yet it does not seem especially disjointed to the membership. Nor does it seem to be the product of a mad or drugged mind. The sequences are riddles, puzzles, that force the membership to answers that suggest an overarching order and a relatedness in the diversity of the cosmos. Approached with the cultural knowledge the membership possesses they both condense and integrate that knowledge as they revitalize it. And the sequence of images link together various domains and levels of cultural experience. A cosmological integrity is suggested if not made explicit.

For example, taking any image, we can, even in this sermon segment, follow its transformations into various domains, thereby associating them. In the shorter sermon—not quoted here—to which we have referred in regards to playing on roots we find "the bag of waters" (*abun menzim*) of birth associated with the forest pool of creation (*enyenge abiale bot*), associated to the great river crossed in Fang migration (*oswi ye okua*), associated to the cosmic sea of the origin of all things (*mang*). A sense of reverberation and relatedness between levels and domains of Fang interest and experience is obtained. In circling around one image other attributes of that image embedded in other domains of experience are suggested. Out of our own puzzlement we are extended to larger integrities in wider contexts.

### Syllogisms of Association

Extension, condensation, and revitalization are all products of this kind of puzzlement. But what is brought together is more a stimulated thought—a stimulated contextualization—in the auditor than explicit reasoning by the sermonizer. These sermons give their auditors cosmologic ideas even when these auditors don't understand them. The sermonizer himself reasons primarily by playing on roots and by playing on elemental images, by making these elements emerge in different domains and at different levels. His use of analogy is not purely random.

There is here, then, a kind of "reasoning together" of things which is important to the integrity of the sermon experience. We should recognize it for what it is, particularly in light of the academic testing by syllogism to which African subjects have been submitted. We may call this a reasoning by syllogisms of association. It is a kind of reckoning with an argument of images, as it were, which suggests a reconciliation of parts. More particularly, it represents a reconciliation of the social subjects of that thought: men and women, the living and the dead, men and the gods. These subjects are both problematic, inchoate, within themselves—What is a man? Who are the gods?—and they are problematic in their relationship to each other.

As far as the inchoate condition of the subjects themselves, Bwiti regularly, fulfilling its role as a religion, predicates a more concrete and manageable identity upon the believers. That is, metaphors and metonyms are brought to bear upon them personally. In the sermon cited, for example, it is said of Fang that "they are forest" and the identification of the members of Bwiti with trees or with the forest is recurrent and basic. It is what we might expect of a religion in the equatorial regions. Another inchoate subject of concern is life itself. What is life? The sermon offers the metaphor: "life is sugar cane," that is, it comes in sections, and if approached section by section it can be consumed with sweet satisfaction.

More interesting, however, are the sequences of "syllogism-like" predications in which two subjects are related to a middle or common image which is lost in the process of the "argument" leaving the two subjects in a situation of identity, equation, or reconciliation. Thus in paragraph 17 of the sermon cited, women are first equated with the

