

THE GENESIS OF AN IDEA: REMEMBERING VICTOR TURNER

by Edith L. B. Turner

Victor Turner, to whose memory this and the next issue of *Zygon* are dedicated, was the major figure among symbolic anthropologists who came to the realization that brain research applied closely to his own studies. At the same time Philip Hefner and Robert Moore, well-known scholars of religion and great organizers, reached out to him and brought him to Chicago to meet the brain scientists and religion scholars of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science who had been reading his work. To me it was as if three people had been working on one jigsaw puzzle, each succeeding to fit together a number of pieces on his own, until he could do no more. Then suddenly each saw that his section had its further continuation in the sections of the others. And they fitted. A shifting of the sections a little, a closing of the gaps, and the whole picture was made.

Back in London in 1965 Vic Turner had taken part in a discussion on "Ritualization of Behavior in Animals and Man" at the Royal Society. At that point Vic was beginning to see ritual as making visible and publicly controlling irreducible ambiguities and antinomies in society. The question for him then was, since this element in the human condition, and the ritual healing of it, was universal, might it draw on a genetic propensity of humankind? At the discussion in London other anthropologists—as they had done hitherto—were pressing for ritual to be regarded as culturally invented, a cognitive and classificatory enactment designed to condition minds to the correct structures of society—in no way a genetic endowment of the species. Vic, though, could not see this "social conditioning" as all in all, for he was throwing off the shackles of social structuralism that argued that all human behavior derived from one's structural place in society. Ritual was concerned with more than that, he knew. What was this complexity

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within ritual that would not fit into Marxism, that was nonutilitarian? There was even something *antistructural* about it. He was already interested in the liminal middle phase of rites of change, where there was a dance of old and new, rich in the oddities of ludic recombination, with room for both the archaic forces and the deep antinomies. Looking closer at liminal symbols he discovered how they were polarized: each had its high ideal and its deep energy sources in emotion. And in the heart of the liminal domain there dwelt something sacred, the supernatural.

When in the seventies neuroscience was liberated by the remarkable new discoveries about the lateralization of the brain and about the three levels, reptilian, limbic, and neocortical—all involved in human action, Vic realized that these factors are recognizable in the functioning of the tribal rituals he had experienced and studied. And when he read *The Spectrum of Ritual* (1979), by Eugene d'Aquili and others, and heard about the effect of the spillover from one hemisphere into the other, enabling the ineffable experience, he responded eagerly, because, as he said much earlier in the section on Chihamba in his book *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual* [1962] (1975), the Ndembu tribe and many societies also experience the ineffable. They express their puzzlement about how to describe it—indissociable from the very structure of language and conceptualization. Many cultures try to express the act of being, the unitary experience, by means of ritual rather than merely to verbalize the concept of being. And it is ritual that triggers the experience. Here in *The Spectrum of Ritual* Vic discovered how the ecstasy and the union come about—when even paradoxes can appear both as antinomies and as unified wholes. The book confirmed his analysis of structure and *communitas*; the left hemisphere of the brain was concerned with the logical order of structure, while the right gave the sense of the whole, of *communitas*.

Vic was a religious man, a Catholic; and I think it was a delight to him before he died to know that God—Providence—had indeed provided in the human brain an arrangement of organs with which to experience Him. Vic in his researches realized that all humanity, not only Christians, were gifted alike and used their gift. Vic had known deep moments of religion and was ready at the end for the final experience of death—an experience which, on the level that he understood it, gave him back to us all.

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