2010


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Wiley-Blackwell

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3873

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Comparison was out of fashion in anthropology for quite some time but the rising tide of globalization has, it seems, brought it back into favor. James Wilce has ridden the comparative wave and written a stimulating, ambitious, and witty book on the transformations of lament (defined as tuneful, texted collective weeping, both coherent and yet deeply emotional) that occur across cultures in a postmodern universe. Wilce’s original ethnographic research explored grieving in Bangladesh where, under the influence of urban cosmopolitan ideologies, rural people began to feel shame over their “primitive” practices of keening for the dead. This analytic lens is greatly expanded here -- so much so that the discourse surrounding lament becomes the central trope for illuminating all of contemporary culture. While many readers may find this an exaggeration, Wilce makes a fascinating case.

The basic argument is that in order to understand where we are, we need to understand whatever happened to lament -- or, more properly, to the representations of lament. Wilce’s focus is not on meaning or experience per se, but on the labels and categories that place meaning and experience into genres, which he argues can provide evidence of underlying cultural processes and their effects on individuals.

The book is broken into three parts. The first outlines the history of lament worldwide -- while simultaneously cautioning that the very act of rendering lament historical is an ideological move that degrades it and undermines its real present pertinence (self-consciousness pervades the entire text, which includes many scare quotes around words like historical and real). The second section discusses the taming of lament in various contexts, always under the influence of the inevitable trek toward a postmodern world of floating signifiers. Thirdly Wilce records the contemporary resurgence of lament, arguing that the postmodern condition oscillates between exuberant celebration of progress and “a mass form of mourning over ‘progress’ as loss” (p. ix). This is the most personal section of the book, as the author records (with discretion) his own involvement in a Finnish revival of mourning where “intersubjective mutuality” was achieved.

Throughout, Wilce’s analysis relies on Greg Urban’s (2001) theory of metaculture, defined as “bits of culture that are about other bits of culture” (p. 13). Metaculture includes mass media, advertisements, and academic books (and reviews of them) that render various circulating cultural artifacts and processes desirable (or repulsive) to a voracious international audience. Apparently, we are now living in the hyperreflexive world of pure relationships posited by Anthony Giddens, ruled by the exercise of personal choice (1991). Where Wilce goes beyond Giddens and Urban is his claim that postmodern improvisational intentionality coincides with a pervasive sense of nostalgia for primordial authenticity. The ghost of Weber has not yet been laid to rest.
Wilce eloquently describes this oscillating process in a variety of contexts ranging from Greece, Finland, and Ireland to Papua New Guinea and Bangladesh. He shows that the revival of lament swings toward nostalgia in Finland, novelty in Bangladesh. Among the Tlingit in Canada, spontaneous (and therefore dangerous) grief and grievance disappeared with the banning of the potlatch. But potlatch has now been restored with the soothing addition of Christian hymns. British practice emotional control in their grief, while upper class Americans try to cultivate expressivity. These instances are intriguing, but it is unclear what social mechanisms push renewed expressions of lament in one direction or the other. Despite the ethnographic variety that is invoked, it seems that Wilce’s understanding of the representations of lament is based on assumptions about a singular kind of modern public that is infatuated with change while simultaneously desiring solidity. As a result, his emphasis on the power of description to manufacture reality tends to gloss over the obdurate structural, political, and historical aspects that would be of use in explaining distinctions and patterns in the story of lament.

Further, the central importance Wilce gives to shame as the prevailing reaction to the global predominance of middle class values downplays rebellious contemporary aesthetic genres such as hip-hop and identity-oriented social movements such as the Zapatistas. Nor does his formula do justice to the antinomian and carnivalesque performance displays of the Caribbean where reputation, as manifested in ephemeral style and transgressive flair, opposes respectability (see, for example, Miller 1994). This may be because Wilce’s portrait of postmodern nostalgia conceptualizes authenticity solely as a matter of a return to an imaginary origin and ignores authenticity as an experience -- an intensification of being. The former is characteristic of struggles for national identity and revolves around a folkloristic and textualizing rediscovery of the past, while the latter is characteristic of efforts to unveil and express the self and is more a matter of mystical communion and revelation (Lindholm 2008).

Finally, while Wilce does criticize intellectual representations of lament for their textuality and while he attempts to do justice to musical vocality and the bodily performance of lament, his overwhelming emphasis is on the role entextualization plays in the objectification and decontextualization of grief. Ethnographic objections can be made to this formulation from two, somewhat opposing, directions. First, to entextualize a performance need not necessarily be to decontextualize it, because entextualization can sometimes be a part of performance and therefore be part of the context, in the broader sense of the term. For example, when a Chinese Daoist priest writes down his prescription, the patient burns the text and drinks the ash with water (Overmyer 1986:67). Second, objectification does not occur solely through the entextualization of a performance/lament. Rather, repeated enactment itself may well play an important part in objectification. For example, the act of Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian prayer is both textually encoded and bodily incorporated through imitation of the postures of others. It is the latter which evokes a powerful emotional response and a sense of immediate spiritual connection (Norris 2005). In other words, while objectification certainly is implicit in the circulation and acceptance of the same authoritative texts across space and time, the relationship between text and embodied act is more complex than Wilce’s perspective permits. His emphasis on mediation and representation, while providing a powerful tool of analysis, occludes the passion of existential experience.
Much more could be said about this well-written, well-conceived book. It brilliantly brings to the fore issues of burning import for anthropologists and also for anyone interested in exploring the ambivalences and trajectories of our present condition. The questions it inspires are precisely the questions we ought to be asking.

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