museums: the depiction of nude and semi-nude children. Torgovnick's focus on the photographer's documentation of the young girl's "precocious sexuality" overshadows the original cross-cultural exchange. Meaning becomes a hybrid of cultural exchanges. As such, Torgovnick's interpretation—although politically biased—is not altogether without meaning shifts through time and across contexts.

While categories of "Old" and "New" Mythologies are used productively, at certain points, Dutton seems to exaggerate several concepts and oversimplify many concerns. He tends to obscure some of the most important issues within the debate surrounding the collection and reception of "tribal arts." Critical theory and cultural studies can be used to promote communication and understanding between and within social groups and foreign cultures (both Western and non-Western).

Emphasis, however, must be on analysis of the "self," not interpretation of the other subject or culture. Interpretation requires many kinds of tools and types of information. I strongly urge Dutton to rethink his position on postmodernism, poststructuralism, and feminist theory and their usefulness in inter- and intra-cultural endeavors.

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Mythologiques

Denis Dutton begins his essay "Mythologies of Tribal Art" by invoking the work of semiologist Roland Barthes, arguably one of the most insightful critics of cultural essentialism—a spurious "bourgeois mythology of man" that reduces the ethnographic complexity of the world to a shallow and meaningless collection of racial and ethnic stereotypes. This "mentalistomy" of "class humanism" (p. 33) which Barthes identified, for example, in Edward Steichen's 1954 exhibition "The Family of Man" is used by Dutton to draw attention, on the one hand, to what he calls an Old Mythology of Tribal Art and, on the other, to a New Mythology of Tribal Art. The Old Mythology, among other things, is said to subsume disparate non-Western cultures into a single, pejorative category known as "the primitive," while the New Mythology, among other things, acknowledges variations within the "primitive" world only to then counter it with an essentialized model of modernity characterized by a monolithic and oversimplified vision of "the West." Dutton refers to this latter phenomenon as "an inversion of Edward Said's familiar formulation, a kind of Occidentalism." (p. 35). On this important point, I agree entirely with Dutton's admonition (see Steiner 1994:193, n. 6).

Dutton then proceeds, however, without seeming to grasp the irony of his own progression, to essentialize the entire field of recent writings on Tribal Art—reducing the disciplines of literary criticism, art history, philosophy, history of science, folklore, and anthropology to a single field of study with an alleged common point of view and putatively similar methods and goals. Now, I realize that current fashion dictates academic boundary smashing and the blurring of disciplinary genres, but it does seem to me that there remain nonetheless profound differences among these various branches of learning, and that therefore they cannot simply be treated as a seamless whole for the purpose of "mythological" analysis. The problem, of course, with any attempt at synthetic analysis—whether it be a study of the "observers" (as is the case here) or the "observed"—is that a disparate group of individuals inevitably gets thrown together into a seemingly cohesive unit, or what, following Durkheim, Dutton might well in this case have been tempted to call a single (immoral) community.

At one point in his essay (p. 41), Dutton criticizes Marriana Torgovnick for haphazardly grouping such diverse individuals as Henry M. Stanley, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Bronislaw Malinowski, Joseph Conrad, Michel Leiris, D.H. Lawrence, and Margaret Mead. Yet, Dutton himself lumps together with equal falseness writers like Thomas McEvilley, Hal Foster, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, James Clifford, James Boon, Sidney Kasfir, Sally Price, Marriana Torgovnick, and me as the creators and proponents of this so-called New Mythology of Tribal Art. Perhaps, on some level, we are indeed all affiliated with the same tribe, but as an anthropologist I can't help but wonder if this gathering of myriad authors ought not to be regrouped into separate lineages and clans—each, if you will, with its own patron deities and social charters.

After assembling these representatives of diverse fields into the false unity of a fictional tribe whose members profess a New Mythology, Dutton then goes on to make an example of one of the tribe's (mid-career) elders. His savage attack on Marriana Torgovnick's Gone Primitivemis the topic the essay. It is a somewhat weary and obvious commentary that points out Torgovnick's basic ignorance of historical and ethnographic facts—an appraisal of her work which anthropologists and literary critics alike appear already to have agreed upon (e.g., see Price 1992; Barkan & Bush forthcoming). But Torgovnick is not representative (if indeed anyone could be representative) of this group of multidisciplinary authors which Dutton links to the New Mythology of Tribal Art. If anthropology has learned anything in the nearly fifty years since Marcel Griaule published Conversations with Ogotemmeli—a book wherein the words of a single Dogon sage were projected onto the whole world view and philosophy of an entire people—it is that groups are complex and contentious, that an individual perspective cannot be extrapolated to represent a whole society, and that one rendition of a myth does not a cosmology make (see Hountondjì 1983:71-107).

In addition to being guilty of applying to his study his own particular brand of essentialism, another problem I find with Dutton's essay is his use of the terms "Old" and "New" to describe these two mythologies. It seems to me that these labels assume a chronology that is simply not in evidence. The Old Mythology which reduces ethnographic insight and complexity to the shallow and preconceived is not old in the sense that it is no longer with us. In fact, I would argue that the "Old Mythology" is more prevalent than ever and serves to validate art market claims about the economic value and cultural authenticity of Tribal objects. In 1926 art critics Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro could write with colonial arrogance that "the coming of the white man has meant the passing of the negro artist; behind him remains only an occasional un-inspired craftsman dully imitating the art of his ancestors" (1926:13). Subsequent to these remarks, another art critic wrote with equal confidence that "Africa has a thriving business in the manufacture of objects...but the good stuff—the work created before colonialism seeped in and contaminated the old cultures—has been snatched up in the first part of this century" (Bensley 1995:4). This passage, however, is not from the turn of the century but from a very recent issue of The Santa Fe New Mexican daily paper.

Far from being isolated and eccentric opinions, these kinds of remarks are current fare in the popular evaluation of African art. Thus, the myth that "genuine" African art expired on the heels of European contact—an assertion which, Dutton suggests, is a central tenet of the Old Mythology of Tribal Art—is not a fiction or idle tale at all but a powerful subjugating instrument which dampens the African aesthetic spirit and stifles the market for contemporary art.

As much as I disagree with Dutton's general conceptualization of the current "field" of Tribal Art studies, and take issue with some of his terminology, I do, however, find that he makes many insightful observations about the contradictory nature of current attitudes toward non-Western arts. His point, for example, regarding the hypocrisy of scholars disapproving of object collecting is well taken (p. 37), as are his remarks on the double standard used to judge Tribal appropriations of things European versus European appropriations of things Tribal (p. 38).

Given these insights, it is all the more surprising to me that Dutton so patently fails to understand that objects have the capacity to change meaning through space and time. "If an African carving is intended by its maker to embody a spirit," writes Dutton, "and that is an ascertainable fact [sic] about it, then any ethnography that constructs its meaning in contradiction to that fact is false" (p. 40). Dutton is arguing here against those who would contend that the meanings of objects ripped from their indigenous milieus can be manipulated and reconfigured to fit the expectations and desires of different audiences and new patrons. This is not, as Dutton would have it, some radical idea which spews forth from the enraged belly of the postmodern chimera. In a classic and sober essay on the subject, George Boas demonstrated years ago—by analyzing drastic shifts in the interpretation of meaning of Leonardo's Mona Lisa...
New Publications


**Africus: Johannesburf Biennale.** Translational Metropolitan Council, Johannesburg, 1995. 304 pp., 30 b/w & 219 color photos. $140 softcover.


**Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou,** edited by Donald J. Cosentino. UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles, 1995. 446 pp., 250 color photos, 600 illustrations. $89 hardcover, $49 softcover.


From the early sixteenth to late nineteenth centuries—that “a given work of art may in different periods have essentially different content—and therefore be admired for different, if not contradictory, reasons” (1904:234).

Thus, to argue, as I did in African Art in Transit (1994), that interpretations of African art and culture are inconsistent and unstable, that objects hold different meanings for different people (both inside and outside the indigenous culture), and that an object’s message is not a falsifiable truth but has the potential to change as it moves through various cultural and historical contexts is not to buy into the high-falutin poststructuralist discourse but simply to acknowledge that ethnography need not end or (for that matter, pace Dutton, even begin) with the “ascertained facts” drawn from an original moral universe. If men and women, the initiated and the uninitiated, the empowered and the powerless, “read” the meaning of objects differently within the context of their own societies; how then can one argue that meanings, like so many sunken ships, are just sitting in place waiting to be “discovered” by the proper field ethnographer uninfected with poststructuralism’s hermeneutic angst? Moreover, if one studies the shifting meanings of African art objects in the course of their circulation through the international marketplace, then the “indigenous intentions, values, descriptions, and constructions” need not necessarily “be awarded theoretical primacy” (p. 40).

Dutton ultimately concludes his essay with a surprisingly banal argument, urging students of Tribal Art not to apply haphazardly to their work the fashionable jargon laden theories of writers like Foucault and Lacan but to focus instead on “why we ever gravitated to this field in the first place: the beauty of these objects, and the creative power of [the] peoples who make them” (p. 43). There is, to be sure, much beauty and creativity that ought to be appreciated in the arts of Africa, but serious research on African art (regardless of disciplinary perspective) cannot be limited to a mere celebration of the objet d’art. Gazing with rapt admiration at the wonder of a Dan initiation mask or Fang reliquary figure will do little to advance our understanding of African arts and cultures. Sometimes, as it turns out, what is most interesting, significant, and informative about a work of Tribal Art is not the aesthetic nature of the object itself but the more mundane, political, economic, and social networks within which the object is/was embedded and made to operate.

Susan Vogel once remarked that “a pedestrian bundle of sticks communicates only within its own culture where understanding may depend, for example, on the knowledge that it contains branches from specific medicinal plants with particular powers... (A carved) figure, on the other hand, has an expressive dimension and, if it is good, I venture that it will communicate something of its import even when we do not know what its intended content is” (1981:76). Ignoring objects of material culture that do not speak the language of “universal” aesthetics, a
course of action which seems to be indicated in Dutton's conclusion, is a dangerous proposition indeed. For, in our headline rush toward the "beautiful" things, we may find ourselves tripping on the sticks and, in the end, missing the point altogether.

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Primitive Classification

My first response to Denis Dutton's essay was that it needed no reply from me because it is a welcome comparative perspective from a non-Africanist scholar, and furthermore I am in agreement with much that he says. On the other hand he lifted out of context a point I had made in an earlier article ("African Art and Authenticity," African Arts, April 1992) and then reframed it to bolster his own argument, so I felt the need of a correction. On a second reading I realized that there are flaws of classification in his larger project too, so I'd like to offer five points: two small, one medium-sized, and two rather large and compromising.

The largest one, which seriously undercuts the attractiveness of his position in my view, is his reluctance to inscribe himself in his own discourse. I cannot accept the implicit assumption that the author, or any other, stands outside all "mythologies," because his notion of a validatable social truth is also a "mythology" in itself. Earnest talk of a "value-free social science," an urgent intellectual issue a generation ago, has long since disappeared with the introduction of reflexivity, radical empiricism, and other models of action in which the researcher's personal stake may vary but is never seen as neutral. This does not mean that the value of empirical research is in any way diminished, but that we are all implicated, and enmeshed to some degree, in our own "findings." While Denis Dutton may not accept this stance himself, I think that most of my colleagues in African studies probably do, especially those who conduct regular fieldwork in Africa.

The other major problem with his comparison is that it is much easier to parse the more distant precolonial and colonial cultural scripts than postcolonial ones. With the genuinely postcolonial, one is in medias res and often can't see the woods for the trees. Thus, in constructing his New Mythology the author is right on target about some points, wide of the mark on a few others (I will discuss two in a moment), and generally creates an overdetermined picture of what he calls the "prevailing conventions of academic culture." From my perspective, I don't see the uniformity he imagines.

For example, I disagree with the argument of Tom McEvilley and others that postmodern and postcolonial strategies ultimately fold into each other: to me they are quite irreconcilable in certain ways (e.g., on the removal of the artist-author from the object-text, which Dutton rightly criticizes) while alike in others (such as the validation of hybridity). I am certainly not alone in taking this position. So that's at least one basic split among what he calls New Mythology writers. Another is the wide chasm between scholars who theorize out of their own and others' field research (art historians, anthropologists, archaeologists) and those whose knowledge of "tribal art" and of Africa is derived from afar (usually literary scholars writing under the cultural studies rubric, though not everybody in performance studies seems to have the strong ethnographic grounding of a Margaret Drenwal or a Barbara Kirschbel-Blimbelt, either). The most egregious rhetoric (and occasional flash- es of insight) almost always comes from people who have no way of knowing how wrong they can be. Using the criticism of the 1984 MOMA "Primitivism" show as the identifying badge of New Mythology is also a bit unreliable, as there were many different axes to grind. Generally I see the writers Dutton criticizes as much more varied than he does, following several different cultural scripts, all of which are constantly being revised by the actors themselves.

Yet there are a few points I agree with in his inscription of the Old Mythology and even a few with reference to the New. As I've just suggested, I share his dismay at the current popularity of scholars writing about "tribal art" with which they have only a literary connection. The essay he cites by Marjana Torgovnik (in Gone Primitive) on Roger Fry is a particularly vivid example of the kind of spurious reading which can sometimes result. Cultural studies as an intellectual enterprise has produced some of the best (e.g., James Clifford, Annie Coombes) but also some of the most lamentable writing on the collection and representation of "ethnographic." But I think it would be quite wrong to see all of it as sharing the viewpoint which is loosely defined by Dutton's "New Mythology."

This brings me to the next point, which is that a "mythology" is a slippery term because its root word, "myth," has two opposed, yet connected, contemporary meanings: a story which expresses through narrative invention a veiled truth (as in Levi-Strauss) and something that is widely thought to be true but isn't (as in Barthes's "falsely obvious" ideas which are taken for granted). This modern gloss on "myth" (as in "It's just a --") emphasizes its falsity rather than its truth value, but in fact both meanings bring one back to the essential ambiguity of myth and mythology in that truth and falsity either have to be seen as coexistent there, or one must simply reject truth tests in the face of myths and also mythologies. It would better serve the author's purpose to use a different intellectual construction, such as paradigm, or even cultural model, rather than his argument. As it stands, he is entering the deep swamp of traditional epistemologies versus hermeneutics, which isn't really necessary for what he wants to talk about here.

Two more specific points: the author uses a sentence of mine as "symptomatic of a mythology," a type of statement which he generally contrasts throughout his essay with knowledge derived from empirical study. In speaking of African artifacts in a typical usage context I stated, "That from an African perspective these objects are not art in the current Western sense is too well known to discuss here" ("African Art and Authenticity," p. 47). The author goes on to suggest that there is a kind of mystification at work in this statement. Leaving aside the distortion caused by his lifting it out of context, in which I was contrasting the same objects being validated as art in a museum display, I would respond that there is no mystification if the reader knows anything about Africa. Readers of African Arts, both scholars and collectors, could reasonably be expected to know that masks, for example, usually have not been described by the Africans who use them as "art" in the sense of objects of delection (or indeed of subversion) created for an audience of strangers (more or less what I meant by "art in the current Western sense").

This is admittedly an essentializing statement. It ignores masks that are urban, political, and/or pointedly secular in intent. It also ignores what we call mask aesthetics. I do not deny that masks have an important aesthetic dimension and can be discussed by both their makers and audience in those terms if called upon to do so, but this was very rarely their sole or even central raison d'être prior to the transformations wrought by colonial conquest, Islam, and Christianity in mask-using cultures which have been studied. In the Benue Valley of central Nigeria those transformations are still only present at the margins, and it is still the numinosity of masks which far outweighs their apprehension as aesthetic objects.

Perhaps the reason that my point is (again) a "prevailing convention of academic culture," as Dutton notes, is that it derives from a substantial number of empirical studies by art historians and anthropologists including, in my case, several years of fieldwork on Idoma masking. This doesn't mean we shouldn't continue to pose it as a genuine empirical question, as Patrick McNaughton is suggesting ("Theoretical Angst and the Myth of Description" [Dialogue], African Arts, October 1993, p. 82). And I do of course agree with the author that there is no one current Western definition of art. Nor is there one current African one.

Nor is an African unschooled in Western high culture likely to recognize as "art" the same things that Westerners might. My Samburu friend (untutored in things Western, but multilingual, and from a culture with finely tuned aesthetic sensibilities), visiting me here in the United States for the first time, was puzzled by the large Anthony Caro bronze sculpture installed on the Emory campus near my office. (I happen to like it, but one of our more conservatively minded trustees has described it as resembling an exploded boiler.) "What is [this thing] for?" he asked in English. "It's art," I replied somewhat lamely. "What is art?" "Well, it's (longitude while I tried unsuccessfully to think of a Samburu linguistic equivalent)...just something interesting to look at." The other specific point I want to challenge—that the New Mythology "sees buy-african arts · winter 1996 93
Dutton points out that "Old Mythology" has two phases: pre-modernist and modernist. He links the pre-modernist with nineteenth-century imperialism and the modernist with twentieth-century colonialism. However, he somehow confusingly separates the modernist into two categories, Pico and Compas and 'Richard Fry' and the post-phenomenalist. Modernist does not make any distinction within his category of New Mythologies, and his list is extremely diverse. He includes such writers as Thomas McVicker, Hal Foster, James Clifford, Sidney Kasr, Patrick McNamara, Sally Price, Michael Tuan Nguyen, Christopher B. Steiner, and James Steier. More, Dutton seems to go against his own counsel. At any one, he argues against Tuan Nguyen's, "Superman and the Modernist," and his list is extremely diverse. He includes such writers as Thomas McCauley, Holmes Foster, James Clifford, Sidney Kasr, Patrick McNamara, Sally Price, Michael Tuan Nguyen, Christopher B. Steiner, and James Steier.

3. In addition, Simpson, some African-American critics who often explore this topic are: Carrie Mae Weems, Rene Green, and David Hammons.

4. Baber argues that most African-American artists and often explore this topic are: Carrie Mae Weems, Rene Green, and David Hammons.


8. Here, Weems photographs these offensive "knockoffs." Through adding potentially explosive texts, the points to the colonialist attitudes embedded in the objects.

9. Although the photographs here is from the West, the photograph, like any Western or non-Western work, more or less undergoes an alteration once it is put on display in a museum or any other institutional venue. STEIER: Notes, from page 93

1. See especially Barth's classic essay on this subject, "The Blue Guide" (1972-7-7).

2. For a more recent interpretation of The Family of Man, which elicits semiotic interpretation in fashion of more detailed historical and cultural analysis, see Sandeen 1995.

3. See also Carter (1990) who analyzed this "an逆势" several years ago in less detail.

4. My thanks to Duane Anderson for bringing this article to my attention.

5. For a brilliant analysis of the crucial role played by "pedestrians" in the functioning of social, economic, and religious institutions among the Passaic River Ojibwe of East Africa, see Kasaam & Molyneux forthcoming.

References cited


