

## Reviews

Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Les Chairs de la mort*, Collection 'Les empêcheurs de penser en rond', Paris: Institut d'Édition Sanofi-Synthélabo, 2000

'The dead have never left us . . .' This idea from the Senegalese novelist Birago Diop, which is quoted at the beginning of this work, is the guiding light for Louis-Vincent Thomas, who taught for many years at the University of Dakar. He is responsible, amongst other writing on African cultures, for substantial studies of Diola society, which extends from Senegal through Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso to the Ivory Coast. In this post-humous publication the prolific anthropological work of Thomas reaches a kind of theoretical synthesis of earlier observations: 'conceived by him', the author of the Preface, Jean-Marie Brohm, tells us, 'as a theoretical synthesis of a particularly rich and diverse career in anthropology' (pp. 9–10). The author first identifies the epistemological site from which he speaks. Thomas's career began in philosophy; he then became interested in sociology, which led him to thanato-anthropology. Throughout this journey 'I did not change my strategies one iota: they were to bring together various disciplines (pluridisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, the quest for transdisciplinarity) around a specific topic . . . to pin down and justify differences . . . in relation to existing or possible theoretical models . . . to rethink old topics giving emphasis . . . to perihuman, suprahuman data, or the margins or periphery of the social' (p. 11). This sort of horizontal anthropology is wary of the dualisms (nature/spirit, space/time, rational/irrational, normal/pathological) of dogmatic scientism and authoritarian disciplines. This 'open hermeneutics' (p. 18) sees itself as holistic in that it embraces the totality and the anthropological complexity of the human. Thomas then enunciates a thesis that is developed throughout the book in three parts:

Every society, through specific practices and beliefs, arranges its immortality.

Death is a sociological indicator through which a society observes, interrogates and critiques itself.

Alongside anthropological theories that emphasize the importance of kinship, games, gifts, etc. death is for Thomas the ontological bedrock of society. A society says what it is through the way it treats its dead. Social education can only be truly discovered in its method of combating the oblivion that death often represents, because throughout this struggle it plays tricks and puts up pretences, both revealing and hiding the archaic fantasies that structure each social group's imaginary.

The book is divided into two long sections that are complementary. The first raises the theoretical problems of ethnothanatology and focuses on death, while the second returns to the general problem of the body in sub-Saharan Africa. It is this structure that justifies the two nouns in the title: flesh and death.

The aim of ethnothanatology is to explore the different types of metaphysics, ethics and politics surrounding death in Africa. In this regard Thomas draws up an important

typology of death taking the example of the Diolas, who distinguish between social death, pseudo death, symbolic death, bad death and good death. This sociological aspect is supplemented by funeral techniques and fantasies (death as aggression and artifice, death overcome or denied, death as breakdown). Thomas proposes a code of ethics for death. First he attacks the tactic of abrogation that is now leading to a sort of desocialization of death. It is turned into a managerial and administrative matter. Then he deplors the way 'the dying are spirited away' (p. 105) and death is bureaucratized in hospital. Finally he considers problems connected with bioethics such as euthanasia and on that basis outlines some philosophical ideas on incurability, meaning, time, suffering and anguish. Death and its ceremonial lead on to the interrogation of two great psychological and anthropological referents, separation and integration. How does a society structure its moments of separation and to what extent does every integration speak of and represent a possible separation? What does it mean to separate? This is one of the important questions that Thomas finds in funeral rites. How does a society articulate through death its relationship with genealogical principles, what is paternity? How can maternity be recognized? The author draws an analogy, for example, between funeral clothing and the new mother's clothing. How does a society deal with contact with remains, what is left behind? What is the social status of decomposition? Thanatological techniques allow us to see, in the embalming of corpses, or methods of hastening decomposition, how a society structures its sense of smell. Socialized death is inseparable from a symbolism which has many facets. Masks for funeral dances, the corpse's relationship with clothing, the way the body is transported, the sounds that accompany funeral processions, the mocking of the corpse's facial expressions and the renaming of the dead interrogate a society's connection with representation and simulation (the mask), hearing (what relationship is there between pain, suffering and sound?), laughter and naming. In the end actions on and around death and the dead are designed not to celebrate a disappearance but to trick that oblivion that haunts the survivor and ensure that life is victorious: 'in Africa, Eros always wins out over Thanatos. That is the great lesson . . . that African wisdom teaches us' (p. 228).

On ethnothanatology the author outlines some thoughts on the body in Africa. The first methodological premise is to stress that for Africans significance lies not so much in the problem of knowledge as in the notion of life: 'confronted with hostile nature and with techniques of limited effectiveness, black Africans must face a future shot through with insecurity. Will they have enough to eat and drink? Will they remain in good health?' (p. 232). The body enters this quest as the referent that tells of the organization of the world, which explains, according to Thomas, the 'primacy of feeling' for African women: 'It is not surprising that people have spoken of the enormous emotional warmth of blood black . . . indeed feeling is the very springboard for relating to the world, for to be moved is to be part of the interplay of forces, in close communication with group members' (p. 235). This body is rhythm and is connected to strength (p. 236). Starting from notions of rhythm, life and strength, Thomas studies the symbolisms related to the body, the care of the body and their meaning, the power that passes through the body in divination, witchcraft and magic. Even more interesting is his extremely relevant analysis of the ritualization of the body through trances and the process of possession. This lengthy exploration of the body is in fact a meditation on the notion of time in which the author reveals the plurality of social time in Africa. 'And to control . . . time black Africans do not

simply reach out for the omnipotence of the authenticating . . . or sacrificing Word . . . They mobilise all the living forces of the human creature' (p. 554). This scholarly volume has the great merit of adopting a horizontal methodological approach to social phenomena, but it occasionally remains the prisoner of African sociological literature that arose out of the 'négritude' movement. Why should Africans be defined essentially by feeling and rhythm (pp. 233–235)? These ideas recall Senghor – who strangely is not mentioned in this book! – and his famous 'feeling is black just as Reason is Greek'. Does this author not fall back into the essentialism that his approach challenges so strongly throughout the work?

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(translated from the French by Jean Burrell)