

<SH>Book Reviews

<RPI>**Un Roi Africain et sa Musique de Cour.** Gilbert Rouget. 1996. Paris: CNRS Éditions. 392 pp., black and white and color photographs, musical examples, tables, notes, bibliographies, audio CDs.

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Chants et Danses Initiatique pour le Culte des Vôdoun au Bénin. Gilbert Rouget. 2001. Saint-Maur, France. Éditions Sépia. 107 pp., black and white and color photographs, map, glossary, notes, bibliography, index, audio CDs with two accompanying booklets including musical examples and listening notes. Paper, 30 Euros.

<RTXT>Can a ritual be a work of art? And if it is a work of art, are those who are engaged in it artists? And what about the ethnographer representing the ritual? Is he, too, an artist, a painter? It is questions such as these that underlie Gilbert Rouget's latest and most ambitious publications to date, in which the eminent French ethnomusicologist and long-time director of the Department of Ethnomusicology at the Musée de l'Homme returns to two of his life-long projects in Benin: the initiation rituals into the vodun cult and the ceremonies at the court of the king of Porto-Novo. Of course, such questions do not differ fundamentally from some of the aesthetic concerns that drove the interpretive anthropology of the 1970s and 1980s: the view of culture as text, the notion of ethnography as a form of intersubjective dialogue, etc. But to Rouget these sorts of parallels are not, at least not explicitly, the major source of his inspiration. Rather, it is two intertwined strands of French intellectual history that seem to inform Rouget's fascination with the theatrical and aesthetic dimension of ritual: the golden age of French

ethnologie as represented by the work of Alfred Métraux, Michel Leiris and Roger Bastide, and, perhaps even more surprising, a certain rationalism which Rouget, quoting from Michel Foucault's famous discussion of Velasquez' painting Las Meninas, associates with representation, but which perhaps also betrays a (tacit) fascination with absolutist court ritual.

How does all this translate into ethnography? Simply put, by mimicking the aesthetic thrust supposedly underpinning vodun and chiefly ritual, by writing ethnography as art. Both publications--and it makes sense to discuss them as a pair, because the premise (and more often than not the language in which it is couched) is the same in both--are organized around the formal structures of the rituals being examined. Both foreground visual parallels, syntactic alignments, and musical repetition. A stunning array of well over four hundred photographs, dozens of transcriptions, exquisitely written commentary, and extended audio samples (assembled on four CDs) of some of the most extraordinary music ever recorded in Africa--all this is being staged--or "represented," as Rouget would say--in the most meticulous choreography.

Chants et danses initiatiques consists of two volumes (which come together in a handy and nicely designed case). The first volume contains photographs and comments on a series of initiation rituals (of adepts of Sakpata vodun for the most part) that took place in various locations around Porto-Novo between 1958 and 1981. A second, much thinner, volume contains two CDs complete with exceptionally fine-grained transcriptions (prepared by Tran Quâng Hai), sonograms (by Jean Schwarz), and fairly detailed explanatory notes. In the first volume Rouget's strategy, again echoing perhaps what Foucault called "pure representation," consists in extracting and then collaging

some of the key stages of each of the seventeen rituals being examined into an order that highlights their enchaînement rather their content or meaning. Sometimes this order is that of the chronological sequence of these stages; at other times Rouget contrasts on opposite pages some of the key moments of identical rituals being performed at different times and locations. This strategy--which clearly and, one assumes, quite intentionally has a filmic quality about it--allows Rouget to highlight the tight (and historically very stable) formal organization of these rituals while at the same time underscoring the improvised variations or what Rouget calls “live” aspects of the performance.

A word about the music: when I first heard these eerie songs sometime in the 1980s in a memorable exhibition on the river Seine showcasing the work of CNRS researchers, I was transfixed. That was probably not the right way to respond--or, rather, not quite the way Rouget might envision it. In line with his classical bent, Rouget calls these unison, antiphonal, and often strikingly chromatic chants, or acts of “giving grace” as the novices prefer to call them, musica reservata, because they are meant to set the world of the vodun initiates apart from the rest of society. Proper term or not, that is of course precisely what “great art” is supposed to do, evoking in the beholder/listener a sense of awe.

Un roi africain et sa musique de cour follows much the same rationale as Chants et danses initiatiques, except that everything happens on a grander scale and the sense of awe that the rituals (and their ethnographic representation) are supposed to strike in the spectator/reader is an awe of political power. Here Rouget surveys the musical life of the royal “palace” at Porto Novo in all its complexity and historical as well as politico-religious significance. More specifically, the focus is on the music associated with the

rituals surrounding the death of a king, the installation of his successor, and a whole series of intervening events such as the ceremony of the head, as well as what Rouget calls “palatine” rituals. In a second and third section of the book, Rouget examines the music made by the king’s wives and that performed by his servants. An epilogue celebrating the authenticity and beauty of the court music of Porto-Novo concludes the book. Again, much like the companion volume on vodun, all this is copiously illustrated, superbly annotated, and simply fun to read.

What is all this about then? And what lesson does Rouget want his readers to extract from this fascinating journey into the world of two of Benin’s most celebrated traditions? Perhaps not what one would usually expect from an ethnomusicological work and perhaps not even one truth. Vodun initiation ceremonies, Rouget suggests rather laconically, create new and better people, while the king’s music in turn confers power on him and consolidates it. But both of these “functional” goals contradict what Rouget takes to be the central idea--a very old Western idea of art’s true reason at that--behind vodun “giving grace” songs and the king’s ballets de cour: to be beautiful. Whether this conclusion will satisfy all readers of these books, remains to be seen. But at the very least, Rouget did a beautiful job convincing us.

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