

A French structuralist solution to the kalela dance paradox?

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Abstract. I present a solution to the paradox of the kalela dance based on the need for a contrast.

The paradox of the kalela dance again. In his book *Anthropology After Gluckman: The Manchester School, colonial and postcolonial transformations*, Richard Werbner presents it like so:

Mitchell was struck by a paradox in the dance. In some tribal dances, people dressed up in all their tribal paraphernalia and danced traditional dances, while chanting traditional songs. By contrast, the *kalela* dance included no tribal elements or insignia. The dancers were immaculately dressed in smart, modern clothes, and the main roles performed were modern – the king, the leader (blowing football referee’s whistler), a doctor, and a nurse. They performed before a popular audience distinctive of town, drawn from a wider public than any tribe or ethnic group. The language of the dance was the town argot, *chicopperbeliti*, a mix of Bemba, English and a Creole of Zulu called *Fanikolo*. Yet in an apparent paradox, the composition of the performing team was tribal – they were nearly all Bisa – in the team best known to Mitchell; they came from the same tribal group under chief Matipa and were almost all Roman Catholics, with one Muslim. And in a tribal tradition of praise singing, ‘they set out to praise the Bisa in general, and their chief Matipa in particular.’ (2020: 111)

This was my clarification of the paradox:

- (a) In this situation, different tribes dress and dance to express who they are
- (b) The participants in the kalela dance are (nearly) all from the Bisa tribe.
- (c) The dress and dance style of those in the kalela dance does not demarcate the Bisa tribe. Notably there is no use of traditional dress or dance.

Now I remember learning French structuralism many years ago, decades ago actually. David Rheubottom said that if I show you one red thing and another red thing and a third red thing, to teach you what red is, you won't understand. You need a contrast. You need to be shown a blue thing. "Red" has its meaning apparently within a system of contrasts. Similarly, in order for the other dances to appear traditional there needs to be contrast. Taken by itself the kalela dance may not appear to be modern or anti-traditional. (It has a king in it after all.) But within this system of dances, the other dances appear traditional alongside it, and such a dance is necessary for that effect on the anthropologist, or so it may be maintained.

I think there is not enough data to do a proper structuralist analysis and I have always found structuralism difficult to understand. But I include this approach, in this store.

References

Edward, T.R. 2022. Beyond tribalism: an attempted solution to the kalela dance paradox.

Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWBTA-3>

Werbner, R. 2020. *Anthropology After Gluckman: The Manchester School, colonial and postcolonial transformations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.