

Beyond tribalism: an attempted solution to the kalela dance paradox

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. I propose a solution to the paradox of the kalela dance, as presented by Richard Werbner, based on a variety of liberalism I once identified.

In his book *Anthropology After Gluckman: The Manchester School, colonial and postcolonial transformations*, Richard Werbner presents the paradox of the kalela dance, from Clyde Mitchell:

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, *chicopperbeli*, 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)

So here is a paradox, which I am hoping is the kalela dance 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.

And here is a question: can anyone apply to be part of the dance? If the answer is yes, but strangely mostly Bisa got selected, then my interpretation is that they are showing mastery of a troubling kind of liberal’s trick: “We can set up the rules so that anyone can apply and the selection will be based on merit and we show no trace of breaking the rules and yet only our friends get in. We do not need to introduce a rule for joining our department or publishing in our magazine or qualifying for our dance that you have to be our friend or from our tribe, or any other explicit restriction. That is really vulgar!” (See Edward 2022. By the way, there are other puzzles from the quotation above, such as that the king is regarded as a modern role. Searching for societies in “the state of nature,” in the sense of no government?)

References

Edward, T.R. 2022. Its many varieties: does liberalism merely alternate between ethics and economics? Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWIMV>

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