

ANDREW H. APTER

In Praise of High Office: The Politics of Panegyric Among Three Southern-Bantu Tribes

Abstract. — *This paper analyzes Southern-Bantu praises of high office as speech-acts which mediate between a chief and his followers. By exploiting the differences between addresser and speaker, addressee and hearer, office and incumbent, the specialist praise-singer communicates (1) to the public on behalf of its chief, distributing his legitimate authority to maintain public support, and (2) to the chief on behalf of his public, evaluating his performance against the requirements of his office. Using an incumbency model adapted from Comaroff, the social values and institutional mechanisms invoked by these praises—to mobilize or divide public support—are identified in a rudimentary content-analysis of Tswana, Zulu, and Xhosa praise-texts. [South Africa, Poetry, Chieftaincy, Incumbency Model]*

Introduction: Praise-Singing and the Incumbency Model

The aim of this paper is to analyze Southern-Bantu praises of high office as a form of political action. This important dimension of Southern-Bantu praises is often overshadowed by what Western scholars consider to be higher virtues of literary art—stylistic and poetic devices of dynamic stress, elision, parallelism, chiasmus, and of course metaphor and simile. These devices do abound in what Ruth Finnegan calls “the most specialised and complex forms of poetry to be found in Africa” (1970: 121), but fine-grained stylistic analysis of these works should not blind us to some of the more basic and

Andrew H. Apter, B.A. in Social Anthropology (1980 from Cambridge Univ.) and in Philosophy (1978 from Yale Univ.). Fieldwork in Nigeria in 1977, now working for his Ph.D. at Yale Univ. Forthcoming publication on “Yoruba Talking Drums and Ritual Communication.” Address: 51 Hillhouse Ave., Dept. of Anthropology, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520.