

## Rezensionen

**Anderson, Martha G., and Christine Mullen Kreamer:** *Wild Spirits Strong Medicine. African Art and the Wilderness.* Ed. by Enid Schildkrout. Photographs by Jerry L. Thompson. Seattle: University of Washington Press; New York: The Center for African Art, 1989. 152 pp., map, photos. Price: \$37.50

The very well-documented analysis, the interregional and thematic focus, as well as J. L. Thompson's splendid photographs – quite exempt of voyeurist exoticism – of performances and masterpieces of visual art from 67 societies in West and Central Africa, make this catalogue most insightful and enjoyable.

Drawing on interregional cults of affliction and widespread mythic lore, cosmologies, dramaturgy, and patterns of nonverbal body symbolism (viz., scenes of performance, dance, mime, adornment, healing practices) the editor, Enid Schildkrout, and the authors endeavor to find a thematic approach to works of African art including sculpture, drawing, masquerades, shrines, and medicines.

For their approach, the authors draw on Claude Lévi-Strauss' models of dual classification that differentiate among others between wild and domesticated, nature and culture, female and male, water or bush spirits on the one hand and ancestral spirits on the other. Schildkrout argues that such an analysis holds for visual art in agricultural African societies: agriculturalists aim at ritually compensating for their insufficient technological mastery and control over the environment. The editor states that the same binary approach would prove improper for art forms in nomadic societies of herders and hunter-gatherers.

Many artistic performances are a symbolic search for mastery over the wild, unpredictable, unseen, or over intrusive agencies (ranging from predators, wasting diseases, raging epidemics, slave traders, colonial agents and institutions), as contrasted to the qualities of orderly village life (chap. 1). The works of art may also aim at ritually transforming wild-life into potent metaphors and sources of initiatory transformation and order, as is well documented for the Lega of Zaire (chap. 2). Works of art, moreover, aim at ritually transforming wild-life into fertility (chap. 3), or into divinatory insight, and sources of medicines, game and hunting skills, as represented by Songye figures (chap. 4), or into instances of power and authority, as exemplified among others by the royal arts of the Cameroon grasslands (chap. 5).

In ritual performances, the *bush* and *forest* often appear as associated with angry and malevolent wilderness spirits, that is with the domain of anti-order, menace, ugliness, and disease. However, untamable *water* spirits, associated with rain or draught, river or sea, seem to represent more benevolent, but subsocial sources of fecundity, health, good luck, wealth, social change, enhancement, and power. Water spirits appear in cosmogonic rituals of healing or of enthronement that reenact the foetal development and birth of the individual, that portray the individual's sexual maturation, or that aim at enhancing the productivity of crops. In contrast with bush and forest spirits, water spirits and their imagery are more often associated with forms of unprecedented intrusion by foreigners, slave traders, and Europeans, who brought promising new kinds of wealth, and who for hundreds of years dealt with African people from dockside stations supplied by ships and river boats.

Artistic performance and works of art, in the contexts of initiation, divination, healing, and political ritual, may depict and even control the transition from lawlessness, chaos, indivisibility, or wilderness to form, man-made divisions and boundaries, law and sequence in village life. Whereas the book argues that the agricultural mode of production may form the binary pattern under consideration, I would moreover search for basic models in the village mode of settlement, behavior, and production. Does village life as contrasted to the surrounding bush or forest, not underly the way in which works of art are portraying the transformation from formlessness to form, from chaos or anti-order to order, from wilderness to wild-life control and law, from hidden harm to divinatory revelation, from deadly sorcery to healing and social order, from the promiscuity of witches to sanctioned forms of (re)production? In lines with these oppositions, distinctions between male and female, senior and junior, chief and commoner, good-health and ill-health, and so on, give rise to gender-based varieties of spaces, activities, bodily hexis, colors, adornment, and works and styles of art.

Let it suffice to suggest here that the adopted perspective is most heuristic and innovating in the domain of African art studies. In line with post-structuralist anthropology, the analysis should focus even more on concrete art performance, as, for example, on rituals, cults, cosmogonic drama that produce or re-empower the