Ethnology and the 20th-century avant-garde

The Myth of Ethnology

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The fields of scientific research and art became particularly intertwined in the 1930s, when ethnologists and artists jointly succumbed to a fascination with the culture of Africa

Every scientific discipline has its own myths, and ethnology is no exception. Perhaps the one that stirs the most excitement concerns the mutual influence between ethnologists/ethnographers and avant-garde artists (especially those affiliated with surrealism) in France in the 1920s and 30s. On the one hand, this image has artists like Pablo Picasso, Tristan Tzara, André Breton, and André Masson frequenting the Museum of Ethnography at the Trocadéro in Paris, collecting African art, and taking an interest in totemism and tribal fetishes. On the other hand, there are ethnologists like Marcel Mauss and Georges-Henri Riviere, closely linked to the artistic *crème de la crème*, keeping abreast of the latest trends in avant-garde art. However, this is more of an imaginative impression of how things really were, a "founding myth" meant to lend significance to the close encounters between art and ethnology: the objectives of the two disciplines (ethnology and avant-garde art) were frequently mutually exclusive – as can easily be shown. However, that did not hamper the American researcher James Clifford, coiner of the term "ethnographic surrealism" to describe ethnologists' passion for what is "artistically" murky, nonsystematic, and marginal, from seeing this strange encounter as paradigmatic for modern cultural anthropology and modernity in general. Culture is a collage. Modernity is a collage – a truly avant-garde one.

The Dakar-Djibouti mission

The time was December 1930. In Poland, ethnologist Jan Stanisław Bystroń had already begun work on his *National*

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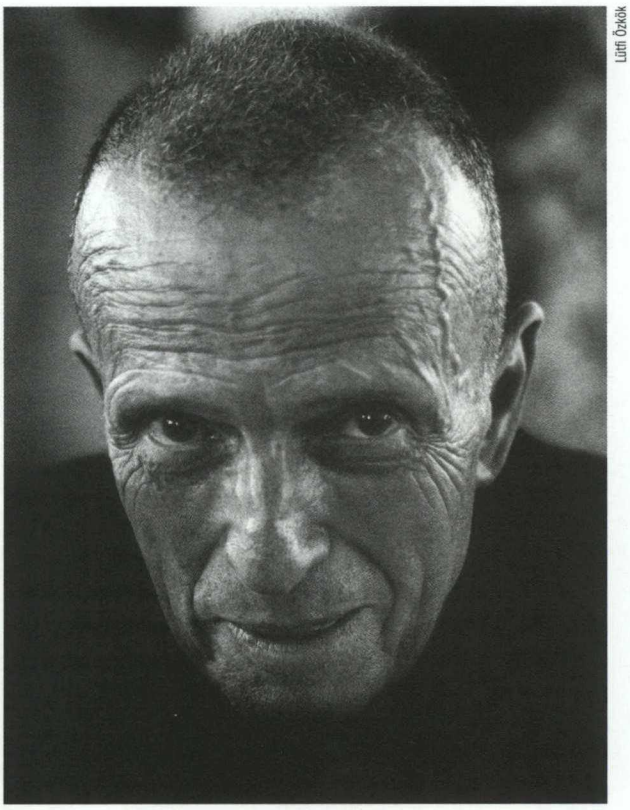
In early 1931, French ethnologists embarked upon the Dakar-Djibouti mission, spending two years studying the customs of African peoples from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean

Megalomania, his most important work (ultimately published in 1935). In Paris, Geroges Henri Riviere, deputy director of the Museum of Ethnography, then published the following note in the avant-garde journal *Documents*: "The press has noted the conclusive date of departure for the Dakar-Djibouti Mission in early 1931. Its nearly two-year objective is to cover Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, across Senegal, French Sudan, the Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, Dahomey, Togo, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, French Equatorial Africa, the Belgian Congo, the English-Egyptian Sudan, Abyssinia, and the French coast of Somalia." The main objective of this voyage, organized by the Institute of Technology and the Museum of Natural History and subsidized by several ministries, colonial governments, and also by major research organizations, was to amass collections for the Museum of National History and for the Trocadéro museum, to study numerous peoples with customs then verging on disappearance, to capture on film and tape the languages and songs of these peoples, and to foster the kind of relations between colonial officials and Parisian research institutions necessary for advancing the natural and sociological sciences.

The mission was led by Marcel Griaule and its crew included two *Documents* affiliates: André Schaeffner from the organology section of the Museum of Ethnography at the Trocadéro, and Michel Leiris, who accompanied the expedition as a secretary-archivist. The editors of *Documents* asked the latter to record his impressions of the project he would take part in, the first ethnographic and linguistic mission of its scale ever to be mounted.

The Leiris journals

The two-year mission was a public-private initiative, and the whole trip was initially meant to be documented by none other than filmmaker Luis Buñuel himself. Yet it was Michel Leiris, this former surrealist with a lively (yet still amateur) interest in ethnography and ethnology, who would become the mission's secretary. Marcel Mauss – the field's greatest authority in France at that time – advised newly-fledged ethnographers to abide by a rule of complete objectivism in their fieldwork, urging them to "say what you know, everything you know, and only what you know" and that "no detail may go overlooked." As befitted an ardent apprentice, Leiris followed his teacher's advice and kept his journal of the expedition with precision and frankness that were simply obsessive. Noting down every detail, he exposed the boredom of real fieldwork and paints a horrifying and truly absurd picture of colonial Africa – an entropic land where no one feels at home. Out of boredom, discouragement, and also his sense of fidelity as a chronicler, Leiris turns his attention to himself: asserting that the true object of ethnography is the ethnographer himself. Writing alone, tormented by doubts. The same conclusions would be discovered anew by ethnologists several decades later, pointing out the literary entanglements of scientific texts. Leiris also broke one more taboo: while in Ethiopia he fell in love with the daughter of a priestess of the Zar cult, with the mysterious name of Emawayish. A forbidden platonic love harbored by an ethnographer for the very object of his study – this is perhaps pushing the deconstruction of science to its limits.



Lutz Dahr

Michel Leiris, poet and ethnographer, documented the research mission to central Africa in his journal

After returning from Africa, Michel Leiris would publish his monumental journal *L'Afrique fantôme* in unchanged form. The result is so frank and objective as to be surrealistic. A document that attests to a profound disappointment in ethnography, in its entanglement with colonialism, in the insufficiency of its tools against the most important matters in life, such as love or death. Nevertheless, this disappointment paradoxically provoked Leiris not to abandon science, but rather to commit himself more strongly to it, to earn the necessary diplomas. This middling surrealist poet would thus eventually become an leading ethnologist himself. Who would Luis Buñuel have become, if he had ultimately taken part in the mission? Would he have filmed the same "Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie" years later? ■

Further reading:

Clifford J. (1988). *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Harvard University Press.