

**BATESON, LEVY-BRUHL, CONCRETE PSYCHOLOGY, & PRIMITIVISM:  
THREE INTERRELATED XMCA CONVERSATIONS FROM FEBRUARY 2012**

**THREAD NAMES**

[xmca] Bateson's distinction between digital and analog

[xmca] Levy-Bruhl, concrete psychology and "primitivism"

[xmca] Re: Levy-Bruhl, concrete psychology and "primitivism"

**RESOURCES**

Piper, A. (2009). *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<http://bit.ly/wxQ1dt>

Rosemont, F. (1989). Karl Marx and the Iroquois. *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion*, 4, 201-213.

<http://libcom.org/library/karl-marx-iroquois-franklin-rosemont>

Martin Packer on Divination among the Babalawo:

<http://vimeo.com/groups/chat/videos/37377690>

**CONVERSATION 1**

**Bateson's distinction between digital and analog**

[1.1] On February 17<sup>th</sup> **Larry Purss** sent the following message on XMCA under the title "[xmca] **Bateson's distinction between digital and analog**":

I want to reflect on the distinction that Bateson discusses in his communication theory that seems to be pointing in the same direction as phenomenology's central notion of "expression." [Bateson's notions of proto, & deuterio, as levels of knowing and how this connects to David Kellogg's focus on "reversibility" as central to "self-mastery" also are interesting departures. Also historically situating the development of his ideas was fascinating.]

Back to the analog/digital distinction. Bateson is attempting to move from monads to dyads. This may be a limiting factor from a cultural-historical perspective but in his exploration of dyadic communication he proposes that communicative action has both digital [language] and analog [the non-verbal] qualities. What is

interesting is his premise that ALL linguistic practices are always "composing" analog situations "within" [NOT "in"] linguistic communication. In other words, with every speech ACT analogical "context" is re-composing or re-configuring. The "analog context" [within dyadic interactions] is always emerging as background FOR the digital speech act as figure. I read this distinction and wonder about how this distinction reflects the phenomenological notion of "expression" at multiple levels of "intentionality." Is Bateson's notion of analog share something in common with phenomenology's notion of "performative intentionality" as the EXPRESSIVE GROUND [the WITHin of linguistic acts?]

To bring the "abstract" to the "concrete". In my personal relations, if I "notice" or am "aware" that the analog context is EXPRESSED and FORMED within each unique act of speaking I will be aware of "movement" as ground. From within this perspective the "analog context" is every bit as dynamic and temporal as the linguistic digital speech act. There is no "in" or "container" in which to "put" the speech act. There is only gestalten as the "ground" [analog] is as dynamic as the "figure." Communicative action therefore is as fundamentally EXPRESSIVE as it is PREDICATIVE. The reasons and justifications of speech acts are ALWAYS EXPRESSIONS forming contexts and all "epistemological knowing" is intersubjective and relationally configuring both analog and digital phenomena.

As a counsellor I can "bracket" [but never reduce] an attempt to make "explicit" [to my awareness] the "expressive ground" of all speech acts. I can also RESPOND or ANSWER to the analog message rather than the digital message. This form of responding "brackets" the linguistic in order to be more sensitive to the analog. In this sense, shifting the figure and ground of communicative action illuminates [visual metaphor or mind as seeing] the EXPRESSIVE or ERFORMATIVE intentionality which is usually the implicit analogical BACKground to our explicit linguistic utterances.

I'm not sure if I'm operating within my own "private" language" and loosing "common ground" but it is my attempt to express my sense that EXPRESSIVE intersubjective dialogical movement is a fundamental aspect or "part" of the cultural historical gestalten. "Part" as metaphor for "cell" that expresses the gestalten.

[1.2] Later that day, **David Kellogg** responded to Larry Purss with the following:

In History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions (Chapter Two), Vygotsky is talking about the difference between counting "by eye" (на глаз) and counting on your fingers. He points out that herdsmen and hunter-gatherers are far better than city dwellers at the former; they can actually compare groups of tens or even hundreds of dogs, livestock or birds "на глаз" with remarkable precision. By comparing a single group with an imaginary one, they find it quite easy to guesstimate exact numbers.

Now you might think that counting digitally is also a natural function. I think the early Vygotsky would have called it a "primitive". After all, fingers are also part of the body. If anything, it is rather more intellectually sophisticated, and closer to the real digital system, to estimate numbers by fitting the dogs, livestock or birds into groups and seeing if one or more are missing.

But the key problem is exactly what you suggest. There is a graphic-visual SIMILARITY between a dog in one group and a dog in another. There is no such graphic-visual similarity between a dog and a finger. So guesstimating на глаз is an analog operation, while counting on your fingers is, quite literally, digital.

I think people sometimes misread this part of the book as suggesting that Vygotsky was racist. First of all, he does use the derogatory term "Kaffir" to refer to South African black people.

But in fact when he uses the term "Kaffir" he is actually quoting Levy-Bruhl, or rather quoting Levy-Bruhl quoting a missionary called Wangemann, and he edits out the most racist parts of the quote. So I think it is actually more likely that he just thinks "Kaffir" is the name of the particular group of people being talked about.

In the second place, the whole argument seems to suggest that somehow sociogeny recapitulates ontogeny--that the ways of thinking of "primitive peoples" are essentially identical with those of children, i.e. analog rather than digital.

I think not so. First of all, he has already rejected the idea that the physical type of man alters during sociogenesis; any "primitive" human and even a cave man, if we could clone him, could learn any cultural function. Secondly, and more generally, he has already rejected any idea that sociogenesis recapitulates or lies parallel to phylogenesis (he calls the process an "analogue" though). So he also rejects the idea that ontogenesis could recapitulate either.

Thirdly, though, Vygotsky is quite scathing about both Levy-Bruhl and the missionary: he points out, for example, that it takes far more intellection to reconstruct a Sunday sermon by notching the shoulder-blade of a baboon than it does to memorize it verbally, contrary to what the missionary supposed. In other words, the "Kaffir's" way of recording speech is actually digital while the missionary's is analogue!

### [1.3] On February 18<sup>th</sup> **Martin Packer** replied:

I've not been following this thread closely, and so I apologize if I am hijacking it. But like David I have been struck by LSV's treatment of the Kaffir. In LSV's notes on Concrete Psychology he discusses the examples of a judge and a husband in some detail. He also mentions "Catholic, worker, peasant." Actually, what he writes is "Kaffir, Catholic, worker, peasant" (p. 65).

The first mention of Kaffir occurs when LSV writes that it is “the social structure of the personality that determines which layers are to dominate. Cf. A dream and the leader of the Kaffirs” (p. 65). He goes on: “In him (the leader of the Kaffirs) sleep acquired a regulatory junction through the social significance of dreams (unexplainable difficulty, etc., the beginnings of magic, cause and effect, animism, etc.): what he sees in his dreams, he will do. This is a reaction of a person, and not a primitive reaction.”

The example of the Kaffir recurs repeatedly throughout these notes. For example: “The relation of a dream to future behavior (the regulatory function of sleep) amounts genetically and functionally to a social function (a wizard, the council of the wise men, an interpreter of dreams, someone who casts lots- are always divided into two persons)” (p. 65). “The relationship between sleep and future behavior (the regulatory function of sleep for a Kaffir) is mediated by the entire personality (the aggregate of social relations transferred inwardly); it is not a direct connection” (p. 67). Overall, LSV mentions the Kaffir 15 times in this short text.

And he used the example in other texts of the time. For example, in *The Problem of Consciousness* (1934) he wrote: “Consciousness as a whole has a semantic structure. We judge consciousness by its semantic structure, for sense, the structure of consciousness, is the relation to the external world. New semantic connections develop in consciousness (shame, pride – hierarchy ... the dream of the Kaffir, Masha Bolkonskaya prays when another would think ...).”

“Kaffir” has become a pejorative term in Africa today, especially in South Africa, in large part because it originated in the Arabic term for unbeliever. It is a term used in the Koran in the same way. But until the early 20th century it was used to refer to natives of southern Africa, often specifically to the Xhosa people. It is the term that Lucien Levy-Bruhl used to refer to the natives of South Africa.

For Levy-Bruhl, of course, divination was a symptom of “primitive mentality.” His analysis in *The Savage Mind* led him to “the conclusion that the primitive’s mentality is essentially mystic. This fundamental characteristic permeates his whole method of thinking, feeling, and acting, and from this circumstance arises the extreme difficulty of comprehending and following its course. Starting from sense-impressions, which are alike in primitives and ourselves, it makes an abrupt turn, and enters on paths which are unknown to us, and we soon find ourselves astray” (p. 480).

The book ends with these words: “In this midst of this confusion of mystic participations and exclusions, the impressions which the individual has of himself whether living or dead, and of the group to which he ‘belongs,’ have only a far-off resemblance to ideas or concepts. They are felt and lived, rather than thought. Neither their content nor their connections are strictly submitted to the law of contradiction. Consequently neither the personal ego, nor the social group, nor the surrounding world, both seen and unseen, appears to be yet ‘definite’ in the

collective representations, as they seem to be as soon as our conceptual thought tries to grasp them. In spite of the most careful effort, our thought cannot assimilate them with what it knows as its 'ordinary' objects. It therefore despoils them of what there is in them that is elementally concrete, emotional, and vital. This it is which renders so difficult, and so frequently uncertain, the comprehension of institutions wherein is expressed the mentality, mystic rather than logical, or primitive peoples" (p. 447).

At least Levy-Bruhl - after concluding that primitive people have no concepts, no true ideas, no sense of self or society, no definite conception of reality, and fail to recognize the basic law of logic - at least he acknowledged the difficulties for the anthropologist of grasping another way of living in the world. For Levy-Bruhl, primitive mentality was not to be considered an early form of our own reasonable mentality, it was fundamentally distinct, essentially other. He genuinely seemed to want to explore "primitive mentality" objectively, without presumptions, especially avoiding the presumption that such people ought to think the way Westerners do. He wrote that the people he studied did not lack the capacity to think abstractly and logically, they lacked the custom and habit to do so. He tried to treat them as different yet equal, not as childlike, or as historical precursors to his own form of mind. And yet he could not avoid describing these people in prejudicial terms. They are "prelogical," etc.

Nonetheless, at times Levy-Bruhl came close to seeing that we are as mystical as they are! "The network of second causes which to our way of thinking is infinite in extent, rests unperceived and in the background in theirs, whilst occult powers, mystic influences, participations of all kinds, are mingled with the data directly afforded by perception, and make up a whole in which the actual world and the world beyond are blended. In this sense their world is more complex than our universe, but on the other hand it is complete, and it is closed" (p. 445). But we too live in a world of the unseen: God, electrons, nuclear reactions, and so on. A select few - our wise men - have the ability to influence these and in a special way to see them. But for the rest of us they are mysterious entities that guide our destinies, or light our houses, or threaten our existence. What Levy-Bruhl called "mystic" was any logic which rested on principals he refused to share (for example, let's assume that a man's soul persists in his clothes when he dies), while to reject the premises of a syllogism was exactly what he found fault with!

"The mind of the 'primitive' has hardly any room for such questions as 'how' or 'why?'" "Myths, funeral rites, agrarian practices, and the exercise of magic do not appear to originate in the desire for a rational explanation; they are the primitives' response to collective needs and sentiments which are profound and mighty and of compulsion" (Levy-Bruhl, 1926/1910, p. 25).

But of course the reasoning that he judged irrational was being demonstrated in the context of interrogations by people who had colonized, oppressed, and often enslaved and killed those they were talking to. Bonfil Batalla, writing of the

treatment of indigenous peoples in the Americas, has noted how “a system of cultural control was put into effect through which the decision-making capacities of the colonized peoples were limited. Their control over various cultural elements was progressively wrenched away, as it benefited the self-interest of the colonizers in each historical period” (pp. 67-68). In such circumstances it would hardly be surprising if such peoples were to show little interest in the topics that Western researchers tried to get them to reason about.

In Levy-Bruhl’s account, one of the “most important components of the primitive’s mental experience” (p. 122), and one of the central aspects of mythical mentality, was their understanding of dreams. He described how for “the South African races” dreams assisted in contact with the dead. He recounted not one but three dreams of Kafirs. Here is the second, the most straightforward of the three:

“A man dreams that an attempt has been made to take his life by one whom he has always regarded as his true friend. On awakening he says: ‘This is strange; a man who never stoops to meanness wishes to destroy me. I cannot understand it, but it must be true, for ‘dreams never lie.’ Although the suspected friend protests his innocence, he immediately cuts his acquaintance” (p. 108, citing J. Tyler (1891), *Forty Years Among the Zulus*). Levy-Bruhl goes on to explain that this unmasking of wizards and revealing of danger stems from the contact which dreams provide with the dead: “The dream is a revelation coming from the unseen world” (p. 109).

It is a small step from dreams like the Kafir’s to practices of divination, the topic of the next chapter of Levy-Bruhl’s book. Levy-Bruhl described how when dreams and omens do not appear spontaneously, the “primitive” will turn to divination. “To calculate the chances carefully and systematically, and try to think out what will happen, and make plans accordingly, is hardly the way in which primitive mentality proceeds” (p. 159). Instead, divination is the tool of choice.

This is the Kafir that LSV makes reference to in *Concrete Psychology*. I take great solace from the fact that LSV not only gave the Kaffir and his dream a central place in his sketch of concrete psychology but also, writing just a few years after the publication of Levy-Bruhl’s work, insisted of the Kafir’s dream that “This is a reaction of a person, and not a primitive reaction” (p. 65). The divinatory dreaming of a Kaffir, then, far from being an illustration of primitive mentality, as Levy-Bruhl would have it, is for LSV an example of the hierarchy among the higher psychological functions.

And lest we assume that those of us in the Occidental world practice only scientific thinking, and that divination is to be found only in premodern societies, in backward, primitive cultures, remember that in May of 2011 a large number of people in the US were sufficiently convinced by Harold Camping’s prophecies of the end of the world that they sold their worldly goods in preparation for their transportation to the hereafter. And how many of us have purchased a lottery ticket based on our favorite number, or our birthdate?

Or tried to predict the outcome of games of chance? “What is clear in most reports of

North American games of chance is that the activity, even when it had crossed the line and become a pastime, was still heavily related to genuine forms of divination" (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971, p. 47). And let's not forget that it was the illustrious Carl Jung who wrote the introduction to the translation of the I Ching, the ancient Chinese book of divination. Jung believed in what he called synchronicity, or meaningful coincidence, and there are Jungian analysts today who use Tarot cards as part of their clinical practice.

And yet, LSV still calls the Kaffir "primitive." Divination - tossing bones - may be "the beginning of conscious self-control of one's own actions," but it is **only** the beginning. It is merely a way of deciding what to do when there is no obvious basis for choice. His position here is like that of Omar Moore, who, in a much-cited article, argued that the function of divination is to introduce what is essentially a randomization mechanism that disrupts customary practices that have become ineffective (as a result of failure-due-to-success effects, such as hunting out an area, or hunting to the point that the remaining animals become wary and hard to catch). This is to say that divination functions precisely because it **cannot** predict the future!

I find myself somewhat disappointed by such an account. It seems to me it fails to recognize the "closed" nature of our own modern universe."

(to see commentary on this post from [Steve Gabosch](#), skip to [Conversation 2](#))

[1.4] [David Kellogg](#) replied later that day with the following:

Well, Martin, you can drive the car anytime (particularly since I was just hitch-hiking myself)!

The other day I was thinking about the term "defectology", and why it seems derogatory to us. I am almost sure that to a Soviet ear it would be our own term "disabled" that is derogatory, because it implies an absolute lack of ability.

A "defect", on the other hand, can be overcome by:

- a) scientific (medical) advances (e.g. retinal surgery)
- b) compensatory abilities (e.g. the use of sign language and Braille)
- c) eradication of all stigma attached to a defect and prejudice directed towards the impaired

It seems to me no accident that "handicapped" and "crippled" are past participles, and they both attach to individual ability rather than the body itself, while the Soviet terms ("impairment" and "defect") are nouns and relate to more or less temporary bodily conditions.

The reason I mention this is that it seems to me that there is a similar difference

between Levy-Bruhl (and by association Piaget) and Thurnwald, on the one hand, and people like Vygotsky and Arsiniev (the Soviet equivalent of the great Franz Boas) on the other. The former believe in "separate but equal" while the latter believe in togetherness and history, and it is ultimately the latter which is the genuinely egalitarian belief and not the former.

As Martin says, Levy-Bruhl (and later Thurnwald) had a kind of "separate but equal" ideology that Americans will recognize from the days of segregation and South Africans from the days of apartheid. For both of them, culture was functional, and every people develops the culture that it deserves, in the sense that every people develops the culture which helps it achieve an equilibrium between its affordances and its needs.

But Vygotsky utterly rejects this. First of all, he completely rejects the idea of "separate" in "separate but equal". He begins his discussion of divination with-- Buridan's Ass (which was a medieval gendankenexperiment similar to our own Schrodinger's Cat, designed to test Buridan's and later Spinoza's contention that free will does not exist because to a rational mind there is always only one possible course of action. He continues with Pierre Bezukhov in War and Peace, who cannot decide whether to join the army or stay in Moscow and try to assassinate Napoleon. These are "rudimentary functions" (in the sense that they have been robbed of the religious context that lends them significance) but they are by no means separate from our own behavior.

Secondly, he completely rejects the "equal" part. Here is what he says about the Kaffir's dream, in Chapter Two of HDHMF:

Р. Турнвальд с полным основанием видит в указанных фактах начало сознательного самоконтроля собственных действий. И в самом деле: человек, впервые пришедший к бросанию жребия, сделал важный и решительный шаг по пути культурного развития поведения. Этому нисколько не противоречит тот факт, что подобная операция убивает всякую серьезную попытку использовать размышление или опыт в практической жизни: зачем думать и изучать, когда можно увидеть во сне или бросить кости. Такова судьба всех форм магического поведения: очень скоро они превращаются в помеху для дальнейшего развития мысли, хотя сами на данной ступени исторического развития мышления составляют зародыш определенных тенденций.

("R. Thurnwald rightly sees in these facts the beginning of conscious self-control of one's own actions. And it is a fact that the man who first cast lots took an important and decisive step towards the development of cultured behavior. This does not contradict the fact that such an operation kills any serious attempt to use reflection or experience in real life: Why bother to think and learn, when you can simply see what you dream, or roll the dice? Such is the fate of all forms of magical behavior: very soon they become an obstacle for the further development of ideas, though at



one stage of the historical development of thinking they constitute the embryo of certain trends.")

Levy-Bruhl sees no real history, only an eternity of difference extending in both directions. Vygotsky takes a developmental view of difference. Yes, it is a bad to be poor and hungry and to lack the means of adapting your environment to your needs. No, it does not in the least imply that things will always be that way; quite the contrary. There are no permanent defects, just as there are no eternal assets.

On the other hand, Vygotsky, unlike Levy-Bruhl and Thurnwald both, rejects functionalism: the purpose of culture is not adaptation to the environment, but rather the imaginative reconstruction and then revolutionary transformation of the environment, and with respect to THAT great work we are all, more less, stranded in the past, just as we are all differently defective.

It's instructive to compare Levy-Bruhl (who apparently never did a day's fieldwork in his whole life) with Thurnwald (who apparently started a minor war with his "fieldwork" in New Guinea and later became a missionary in Africa) on the one hand with Arsiniev on the other.

Arsiniev, who Vygotsky quotes in HDHMF (the story about the lynx claw), was born in Petersburg, but he joined the army and when the Civil War came he found himself Commissar of Minorities in the short-lived independent Soviet Republic of the Far East.

Arsiniev's friendship with a hunter-gatherer called Dersu Uzala was later made into a film by Kurosawa. When his republic joined the Soviet Union, he refused to go West and stayed with his friends in the East, learning languages and gathering specimens. They had civilized him.

When he died, though, his wife was arrested and shot as a Japanese spy. His daughter disappeared into a camp.... There is a small city named after him today. "Western Civilization? Hey..if they would agree, I would not say no..."

[1.5] **Martin Packer** responded to David Kellogg's statement on how "the purpose of culture is not adaptation to the environment, but rather the imaginative reconstruction and then revolutionary transformation of the environment":

This is a very appealing statement, but I'm not sure it provides a basis for a solution to the problem of how to think about primitive/indigenous/traditional peoples.

For one thing, it contains a built-in bias in favor of innovation over tradition. Neanderthals lived happily (one supposes) for 300,000 years without changing their life style. They had culture (tools, clothing, perhaps even song), but they didn't innovate. They transformed their environment, building shelters and so on, but hardly in a revolutionary way. The revolution came when homo sapiens showed up

and wiped them out. Just who was defective there?

And many homo sapiens have sought to reproduce their traditional form of life, rather than constantly innovate. I'm reluctant to say they lack imagination. Or that they are defective, even in the politest way.

In the same way, I'm reluctant to say that use of divination should be considered a defect because it implies acceptance of being poor and hungry, rather than the imaginative drive to change things. The closest I'd be willing to go in this direction would be to suppose that one could argue that some groups are not in a position to reconstruct their circumstances imaginatively, because others are preventing them from doing so, and as a consequence they turn to practices such as divination. But I don't see much evidence for that.

No, I'm afraid the idea that there is an intrinsic purpose to culture amounts to a teleological account of history, with all the problems that gets us into.

[1.6] **David Kellogg** responded with the following on February 20<sup>th</sup>:

Well, first of all, the rumors of the extinction of neanderthals have apparently been greatly exaggerated. The evidence from mitochondrial DNA suggests that we do indeed carry neanderthal genes. Reader, we married them.

Secondly, I have to defer to Martin's intimate knowledge of neanderthal happiness and the extent to which it depended on their traditional lifestyle. But it seems to me that if the neanderthals invented music, they were, in fact, pretty revolutionary in precisely the way that I am talking about.

Thirdly--Martin, or Martin's computer, is being a little naughty here. If you look at the below you will see that the first line he or his computer has is not correct. That was not what David Kellogg wrote at all; it was what David Kellogg said that Vygotsky wrote in Chapter Two of the History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions.

Vygotsky's point is not that we do not use divination today. On the contrary, he begins his whole analysis with a number of examples that show that we do. His point is that this use of divination is an inactive function, because it no longer comes inscribed in the ideological context that gave it meaning. (That is why, for example, although the cards tell Pierre to join the army, he simply ignores them.)

In particular, we tend to believe that the outcome of divination (casting lots, throwing dice, consulting cards) is the result of chance rather than destiny, luck rather than fate. Vygotsky believes that this represents something we may call scientific progress; it is a growth of knowledge, and it is represented by the fact that we now have quite precise statistical descriptions of supposedly "random" behavior.

But there is another very important sense in which we may call the difference between us and our dear neanderthal ancestors progress. We do not accept early death as bad luck or ill fate the way we must if we accept divination. We live a lot longer: something like three or four times as long. When death comes to us, it is not the result of trauma, as usually was for the neanderthals. Nor is it the result of illness, as it was so often in the middle ages. We are the first group of humans who simply wear out.

Martin objects to the idea that culture has an "intrinsic" purpose, and of course in one sense he is quite right. The culture's purpose is not to progress; it is simply to be a culture. The child's purpose is not to grow up, it is simply to be a child.

But (to join this thread to Steve's query) that simply means that culture is not conscious of its general direction; it experiences its progress not as progress (not the way we see it looking back) but as a set of problems to solve (even as a child experiences development). It must solve these problems with a consistent orientation we must call irrealist, and even autistic, because it is based on imaginary things like luck, fate, the future, and modern science.

Our solutions are initially imaginary. But the problems we are solving in our journey from our neanderthal forefathers to modern man are real enough: the sabre-toothed tiger was real, and so was the Black Death.

And the fact that we actually have an adulthood to speak of, whereas many pre-modern human beings scarcely lived to the age of thirty, is what makes the imaginative, and in so many ways false, analogy between sociogenesis and ontogenesis rather more than a metaphor. The child was the father of the man--because children died young."

[1.7] **Martin Packer** then commented on segments of Kellogg's most recent post:

Let me see if I follow your argument. In a nutshell: we've [who exactly?] have made progress because we live longer. And also because we have precise descriptions of behavior that previously seemed random.

We made this progress because that's what culture does [?]. And this includes giving up divination [?].

Hmm. Ok, let me respond to some of your points:

*Well, first of all, the rumors of the extinction of neanderthals have apparently been greatly exaggerated. The evidence from mitochondrial DNA suggests that we do indeed carry neanderthal genes. Reader, we married them.*

Right, we married them. Then we killed them. Very civilized!

*Secondly, I have to defer to Martin's intimate knowledge of neanderthal happiness and the extent to which it depended on their traditional lifestyle. But it seems to me that if the neanderthals invented music, they were, in fact, pretty revolutionary in precisely the way that I am talking about.*

Evidence shows they sang the same songs for 300,000 years. : )

*Thirdly--Martin, or Martin's computer, is being a little naughty here. If you look at the below you will see that the first line he or his computer has is not correct. That was not what David Kellogg wrote at all; it was what David Kellogg said that Vygotsky wrote in Chapter Two of the History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions.*

I thought you were ventriloquating LSV rather than quoting him directly. No matter; I took you to be expounding his perspective, so we're on the same page.

*Vygotsky's point is not that we do not use divination today. On the contrary, he begins his whole analysis with a number of examples that show that we do. His point is that this use of divination is an inactive function, because it no longer comes inscribed in the ideological context that gave it meaning. (That is why, for example, although the cards tell Pierre to join the army, he simply ignores them.)*

Exactly; LSV says that divination is now inactive. I'm suggesting that he's wrong. Divination is alive and well.

*In particular, we tend to believe that the outcome of divination (casting lots, throwing dice, consulting cards) is the result of chance rather than destiny, luck rather than fate. Vygotsky believes that this represents something we may call scientific progress; it is a growth of knowledge, and it is represented by the fact that we now have quite precise statistical descriptions of supposedly "random" behavior.*

Right, that is how the 'modern' world interprets practices like divination. My point was that it's imposing one worldview on another.

*But there is another very important sense in which we may call the difference between us and our dear neanderthal ancestors progress. We do not accept early death as bad luck or ill fate the way we must if we accept divination. We live a lot longer: something like three or four times as long. When death comes to us, it is not the result of trauma, as usually was for the neanderthals. Nor is it the result of illness, as it was so often in the middle ages. We are the first group of humans who simply wear out.*

There is evidence that the Neanderthals lived up to 60 years. More importantly, the relatively long life span in 'developed' countries is very recent; it can hardly be attributed to culture per se. I have attached a figure that shows the non-linear character of some changes in longevity. Also a table on causes of death in Japan - apparently we don't "simply wear out."

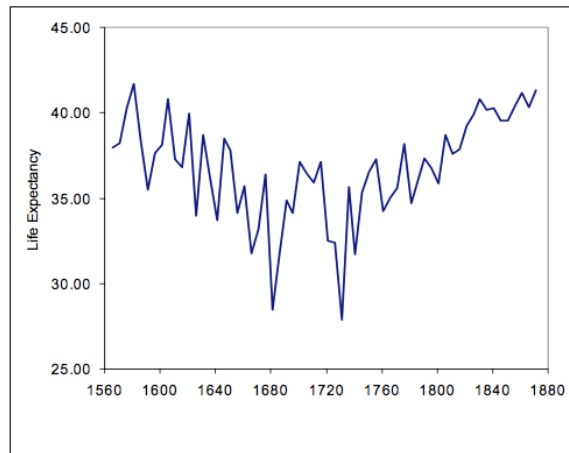


Figure 2: The Non-Monotonic Time Path of Life Expectancy (at birth) in the Course of Early Urbanization: England 1540 -1870. (Source: Wrigley and Schofield, 1981)

**Table 2. Life Table Distribution of Causes of Death for Japan in 1980 and 1990**

Causes of Death	1980 (%)	1990 (%)
Heart Disease	21.4	23.7
Malignant Neoplasm	18.5	21.6
Cerebrovascular Disease	24.3	16.1
Infectious Diseases	8.6	12.8
Violent Deaths	4.6	4.5
Stomach, Liver, and Kidney Disorders	4.3	4.3
Senility Without Psychosis	7.4	5.0
Other Causes	10.9	12.0
All Causes of Death	100.0	100.0

Source: Authors' calculations described in Appendix B, based on the Berkeley Mortality Database (2001).

Notes: The underlying data pertain to five-years age groups. Heart disease includes hypertensive disease. Other causes of death are those denoted in the Berkeley Mortality Database (2001) as other causes, plus congenital malformations and diabetes mellitus. Infectious diseases include pneumonia and bronchitis.

It's not at all evident to me that to the extent to which we live long and happy lives, this is due to a general trend in culture. Or that, more specifically, it is due to a rejection of divination. Or if you're trying to make a different argument, I am not grasping it.

*Martin objects to the idea that culture has an "intrinsic" purpose, and of course in one sense he is quite right. The culture's purpose is not to progress; it is simply to be a culture. The child's purpose is not to grow up, it is simply to be a child.*

*But (to join this thread to Steve's query) that simply means that culture is not conscious of its general direction; it experiences its progress not as progress (not the*

*way we see it looking back) but as a set of problems to solve (even as a child experiences development). It must solve these problems with a consistent orientation we must call unrealistic, and even autistic, because it is based on imaginary things like luck, fate, the future, and modern science.*

So you do still claim that culture has a general direction. And I still say that this is attributing a teleology to human history. In Rosemont's reading, this was a position that even Marx didn't hold ([see resource links at the top of the document for a link to Rosemont](#)).

*Our solutions are initially imaginary. But the problems we are solving in our journey from our neanderthal forefathers to modern man are real enough: the sabre-toothed tiger was real, and so was the Black Death.*

And haven't we also created problems that are real enough? We've eliminated sabre-toothed tigers (and Neanderthals). We've created pollution, over-population, over-fished the ocean... and the list goes on. Where's the overwhelming evidence of progress? Benefit for a lucky few, yes. But overall progress? Aren't you simply valorizing creative destruction (a la Schumpeter)? - claiming that it's natural, inevitable, built in to culture?

## CONVERSATION 2

### Levy-Bruhl, concrete psychology and "primitivism"

[2.1] On February 19<sup>th</sup> the conversation moved to another email thread, titled "[xmca] Levy-Bruhl, concrete psychology and "primitivism," in which **Steve Gabosch** addressed a previous post by Martin Packer (see [1.3] above).

What a great post, Martin. This is a very helpful look into Levy-Bruhl, Vygotsky's use of the term 'Kaffir,' etc.

And ... into that problem which Mike Cole, Natalia Gajdamaschko (in a Cambridge Vygotsky Companion article, I think 2007), you, and others have been pointing to for a long time: Vygotsky's (and Luria's) notion of the "primitive mind."

I don't myself believe Vygotsky was being racist, or "Eurocentrist," as some have referred to his use of the term "primitive," and to his ideas about people living today or in the past in Paleolithic, Neolithic, semi-feudal subsistence farming modes of production and cultures, etc. I can think of no single term to cover all these variations and others like them. Is there one? Anyway, I don't think Vygotsky's reason for using the term was some kind of racial or ethnic chauvinism.

One angle to look into on Vygotsky's use of the term "primitive" is the way he tended to be very careful about trying to use the existing terminology of the scientific literature of his day, and not just make up his own terms - unless he had to. This can be compared to the way Engels (and as I understand it, Marx in his Ethnological

Notebooks - anyone have a copy?) adopted the terms Morgan used for the three major stages of human historical development: savagery, barbarism and civilization. These stages can be translated in modern terms into Paleolithic, Neolithic, and ... post-Neolithic?

Those terms "savagery, barbarism, civilization," were used by Morgan, and by Marxists who have adopted his theory of historical stages, in a completely scientific and non-pejorative way. But today, in 2012, these terms are as outmoded, unsatisfactory, and racist-sounding as the term "primitive."

However, the objects, processes and concepts that these now outmoded terms used by Morgan, Marx, Engels, Vygotsky etc. intentionally indicated and tried to grasp with their intended meanings remain very relevant. But as we all know so well, we can't indicate objects, processes or concepts (or just "objects" for short) without words, and so, when the words themselves get in the way, the concepts become much more difficult to understand and discuss, and as a consequence the objects being indicated by a word become more obscured. And so it has gone.

Moreover, leaving aside the terminology problem, I agree that Vygotsky's **concept itself** about how "primitive man" thought has important flaws. Despite the many true and important **observations** Vygotsky (and Luria) made about what could be awkwardly, loosely (and ultimately inaccurately) described as 'non-modern and pre-literate' forms of human thought, there was something fundamentally wrong with Vygotsky's **explanations**. But CHAT is still working on adequately uncovering, critiquing and replacing those explanations, while at the same time stumbling over these problematic terms and descriptions that keep piling up. The trick is to keep our sights on the essences and contradictory geneses and developments of the objects, processes and concepts of interest.

For me, Mike asks a ton of very valuable and helpful questions about this "primitive thinking" question in his Vimeo presentation in the July 2010 "The Symposium On Vygotsky's Concepts Part I," which also features Paula Towsey and David Kellogg (and for which Paula did a superb job of producing). Mike's presentation is entitled "Do College Professors Think Like Children, Primitives or Adolescents?" His part of the symposium begins on 26:53 (that was a note to myself, actually, not an encouragement to skip over Paula and David! LOL).

Finally, your great post today, Martin, reminded me of the intriguing presentation at ISCAR, Rome you gave on ... let's see, looking this one up now as well ... "Becoming Wise: A Concrete Psychological Investigation of the Babalawo." Thank you for both!

I changed the thread name so there is an easier way to find Martin's post in the archives. Martin's post is below. (And I'm not snubbing you, David! I enjoy your posts as always. I changed the thread name to try to make it a little easier later to find those insights into Levy-Bruhl that Martin so generously provided.)

[2.2] Larry Purss responded to Steve, Martin, and David with the following:

The responses by the three of you and also the article by Franklin Rosemont certainly "primed the pump" of the imagination on the topic of the so called "primitive" in contrast to the "modern" mind. Martin your comment at the end of your post when you suggested that any account that assumes or pre-judges "pre-modern" as a closed system and our own modern accounts as open-ended

"fails to recognize the 'closed' nature of our own modern universe" [fails to recognize ALL perspectives are prejudicial in Gadamer's use of that word]

Closed and open as metaphors is a good place to begin this inquiry. The assumption that "dreaming" may have less of a hold on our modern consciousness than in previous times is another way to open the inquiry. On page 11 of Rosemont's article he suggests that Marx in his last years was arguing about the VITALITY of so called primitive societies as expressed in Morgan's book "Ancient Society" Obviously THIS anthropological narrative had a profound vitality on Marx's dreams and imagination. Rosemont writes,

"The book's [Ancient Society] sheer immensity of new information - new for Marx and for the entire scientific world, demonstrated conclusively, the true complexity of 'primitive' societies as well as their grandeur, their essential superiority, in real human terms, to the degraded civilization founded on the fetishism of commodities. In a note written just after his conspectus of Morgan we find Marx arguing that 'primitive communities had INCOMPARABLY GREATER VITALITY than the Semitic, Greek, Roman, and a fortiori the modern capitalist societies?' Thus Marx had COME TO REALIZE that, measured according to the 'wealth of SUBJECTIVE HUMAN SENSUALITY,' as he had expressed it in the 1844 manuscripts [when a young man] Iroquis society stood MUCH HIGHER than any of the societies 'poisoned by the pestilential breath of civilization?' (p 11-12)

I quoted this paragraph to highlight how captured Marx was by the "romantic imagination" of searching for "subjective human sensuality". Understanding this search for vitality within the "dreaming" vital imagination of the Romantic "vision" seems to express a motivation or yearning that is also an expression of modern consciousness. The Romantic imaginary may be in dialectical tension with Enlightenment ideals and one cannot be understood without considering the other. However, the Romantic imaginary is what is being expressed in Rosemont's interpretation of Karl Marx's "ethnological Notebooks"

Rosemont argues this romantic imagination was a re-visiting for Marx of the themes of 1844 [see page 4 for multiple examples of the power of the



romantic imaginary]

It seems to me that to understand the tension between "modern" and "pre-modern" we need to de-construct BOTH sides of the assumed dialectic. As Martin point's out the modern consciousness is as "closed" or as "open" as the pre-modern. The yearning for "traditional stability" OR "emancipation" co-exist in both structures of consciousness.

If this is "true" then asking how the power of Morgan's book had such a hold on Marx's dreaming and imagination may become a relevant question. Another author who may have something to say on this topic is Andrew Piper. Andrew has recently written a book on just this question of how the book as an object, [in the historical period from 1780 to 1840] transformed the cultural imaginary.

Andrew does not merely look at the technological power of the book, as an artifact, to structure the modern consciousness. He ALSO focuses on how the literary genre of romanticism influenced the materiality of the book as object. Andrew works in the German Studies department at McGill University and interweaves "history of the book" with literary studies.

This is a link to this book:

<http://bit.ly/wxQ1dt>

Andrew's book is discussing this theme of how our current social imaginary is profoundly shaped by our "dreaming IN books" and to understand HOW the media technology of the book transformed the modern consciousness. Andrew's book articulates a rich sense of how books as objects interconnect with human practices and habits. [networks or assemblances from which the book as technology emerged.]

Andrew writes in the introduction, "A history of the romantic book and the romantic bibliographic imagination is in this sense also a history of media adaptation. A study of how nineteenth-century individuals became wedded to or POSSESSED by their books can broaden our perspective of the nature of 'new media' cultures and historical experiences of 'media transition' "

Martin, Steve, and David, I'm not sure if this is shifting the conversation away from Vygotsky, but Franklin Rosemont's article primed my pump in this direction as he explored the centrality of the romantic "dreaming" that "possessed" Karl Marx's imagination. Andrew Piper's book suggests this being "possessed" by books and the way this technology interweaves into our practices may be a central process of our modern cultural historical moment.

### CONVERSATION 3

## Re: Levy-Bruhl, concrete psychology and "primitivism"

[3.1] On February 19<sup>th</sup> **Martin Packer** started a new thread on XMCA and asked if anyone had a copy of Karl Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*. He included in his email an article on Marx's notebooks by Rosemont, which came up at the end of the first thread (see [1.7]).

Rosemont, F. (1989). Karl Marx and the Iroquois. *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion*, 4, 201-213.

<http://libcom.org/library/karl-marx-iroquois-franklin-rosemont>

[3.2] **Steve Gabosch** brought up a presentation Martin Packer gave at ISCAR on a study conducted by a student here in Colombia (Silvia Tibaduisa) of the babalawo.

Martin Packer on Divination among the Babalawo:

<http://vimeo.com/groups/chat/videos/37377690>

[3.3] On February 21<sup>st</sup> **Martin Packer** included an excerpt from a divination session with the babalawo:

*"Let me ask a little question. You live in a aparte-studio... in an apartment, with other people. What person wears your clothing?"*

*"Yes. Sometimes my cousin or my sister uses them."*

*"Orula says not to lend your clothes any more, because that is stealing your luck. That the person who wears someone's clothes steals their astral, steals their luck. If not, make an observation yourself, of how your cousin lives and how you live. She's all happy, all content, and you're not. That is how someone's luck, stability, leaves them. Because [when] one lends their astral, although one washes it 100 times, it takes holds of the astral of the other person as well, and if it's a negative astral, it also includes one. We, the religious, don't loan our clothing, we don't bathe with the same towel or the same soap. We don't lend underwear, socks, shoes, anything. Because these are one's personal things and that takes hold of your astral. Nor wear the clothes of another person."*

Packer added: "there are a number of interesting characteristics to this exchange, but I want to focus on the reasoning involved. I would suggest that it is perfectly recognizable to us. Substitute a more familiar premise: not "when someone wears your clothes they steal your astral" but "when someone uses your toothbrush they give you bacteria" and the rest follows logically, doesn't it?"

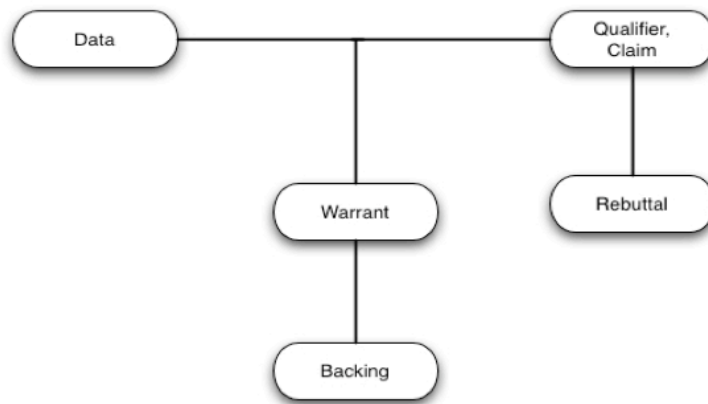
[3.4] The next day **Martin Packer** wrote that he was hoping someone would analyze the passage for him and that he'd have to do it instead:

Much of the babalawo's talk takes the form of advice, recommendations, obligations for the future conduct of the client. What she has to do, or ought to do, includes “go to the church and make mass for you deceased relatives,” “look after your mother, by phone,” “arrange a sacrifice,” “pray,” “wear your hair loose,” and so on. In the excerpt above, the advice is to stop lending her clothes.

It is worth considering in detail the way this advice is offered. In this excerpt it is grounded in what “Orula says” (93) but immediately a warrant is added: “because that is stealing your luck” (we have translated *suerte* as ‘luck,’ but it could equally be ‘fate’). This is then clarified, and then the babalawo recommends to the client that she make her own observation; if she does so, she will see that her sister, who on occasion uses her clothes, is happy, content, while she, the client, is not (94-96). This is presented as an empirical demonstration of the Orula’s point: due to the fact that her sister has worn her clothes, the client’s astral has been stolen. It also counters a possible rebuttal: the “If not...” can be glossed as “If you don’t believe me, consider this...” The consequence of this is that the client is unhappy, while her sister is happy. The babalawo then offers additional clarification, “because...” one can wash ones clothes a hundred times, the astral of the person who wore them cannot be removed (96-98). This displays a counter to a possible qualification that the loss of one’s astral might be prevented by the simple expedient of washing the clothes that have been borrowed. Then he adds what could be taken as an appeal to his authority, or a confirmation that he himself lives by the advice he is offering to her: “We, the religious, don’t loan our clothing...” (98). This functions as backing to the validity of the central claims. He elaborates further; not only clothing should not be shared, but also shoes, towels, soap. Nor do they do the reciprocal: they don’t “wear the clothes of another person” (101), this countering the possible objection that if the effect works one way, it ought to work in the opposite direction, but this has not been mentioned.

The passage displays a complex and subtle argumentative organization. It starts with the central claim, then a warrant (“because...”), then a more explicit statement of the mechanism that is claimed to be operating (“wear someone’s clothes... steals their luck”), then it counters a possible rebuttal, then counters a possible qualification. Then a backing is provided, and a further warrant. Finally, another possible qualification is countered.

Packer ended his post by referencing and attaching Toulmin's model of arguments:



### **Toulmin Model of Arguments**

[3.5] **Steve Gabosch** wrote on February 21<sup>st</sup> that Martin's analysis was helpful and that:

Martin's analysis causes me to think back to Vygotsky's strong critique in T&S Ch 2 of Piaget's conception of development moving from individualization to socialization; Vygotsky argued it is the other way around. My thinking is this is not just true for children. I am not talking about bourgeois individualization, but a deeper process of learning to be self-actuated, learning self-mastery, etc. in a given society, a given mode of production, system of social relations, cultural practices. The paradox of becoming more socialized and cultured is to also become more individualized.

The babalawo is giving what sounds to me, in the context (and pretty universally, actually), like common sense advice and argumentation about conducting and taking care of oneself, of continuing to develop beyond over-socialized habits, and developing along the plane of individualization, paying attention to developing better habits regarding one's body, hair, clothes, belongings.

What is "practical" and what is "symbolic" in this process of moving from (and perhaps sometimes back toward) the over-socialized and develop toward the increasingly individualized are often fused and can be pretty hard to tell apart. This is one of the areas where trying to use one culture, especially middle class life in the advanced capitalist countries, to measure these processes of over-socialization and under-individualization in other cultures can make many mistakes. And where the symbolic aspect may be seen as "irrational" and "backward" and the "practical" as the "real" reason this or that is being done. But this is a reductionist approach to explaining human behavior, reducing people to "practical" activities. That is the way capitalists look at workers.

As for the luck and divination aspect, if Vygotsky is right, then that very, very deep-rooted (and still very much alive) human approach to how to deal with uncertain outcomes has a history far more extensive and has been around much longer than even the god Orula, who is probably a relative newcomer to the practice of helping us mortals struggle for freedom by soliciting chance to help us recognize and accept necessity.”

[3.6] **Martin Packer** replied to **Steve Gabosch** on February 23<sup>rd</sup>:

Yes, the babalawo does not simply consult the oracle and dictate a course of action. He must reason with the client, relating what is in the signs to events in her life, to her concerns and the reasons she chose to consult him in the first place. He must justify the course of action spoken by the Orula, anticipate possible objections, and provide both logical and empirical grounding for his claim about its worth.

[3.7] Later that day **Steve Gabosch** added:

The astral is a very interesting concept. I cannot think of an equivalent word in English, or even a quick definition for the term - yet your presentation gives me just enough to get an intuitive sense of it. The meaning is familiar - but I don't have clear words for it. What is your take on what the concept of the astral is to a babalawo and others who use the term?

And what an imposing translation job this kind of research must require - across modes of production, continents, eras, classes - and of course, languages. No wonder so few researchers try to do something like this! It must be extremely difficult to translate concepts across such expanses in time, space, class and mind. It grossly oversimplifies the task to just describe it as the challenge of translating a localized, religious and mostly oral use of Spanish to written and formal CHAT-ese English - but that begins to give a flavor of how complex it must be. I salute you, Martin, and all those in CHAT, with Mike as the great-granddad, who have been doing this remarkable kind of work. It is one of the cutting-edge aspects of CHAT.

What intrigues me about the astral is how psychologically **concrete** this concept seems to be in the lives of the people interested in the Oruba and Santaria religions. Its concreteness strikes me in at least two ways.

One is the role of the concept of the astral in making lifestyle choices about loaning out personal belongings such as clothing, towels, soap. You point to the solidity of the babalawo's argument. My intuition is telling me he can do this because of the concreteness of the concept of the astral he is relying on and explaining.

Another aspect of concreteness I think I detect is the role of the concept of the astral as part of what is apparently an elaborate system of psychological and social concepts that can be used to describe, explain and predict human behavior. I think of that endeavor as 'concrete' because I can't think of anything people like to talk

about more! And the concept of the astral seems to clearly enable that kind of conversation. (And it is much catchier than "higher mental functions," don't you think?)

The babalawo describes the astral as luck, as stability, as being potentially negative, of having your astral or your luck stolen, as enveloping or being enveloped, etc. Many complex possibilities and configurations are indicated in a single stream of explanations. Like concepts such as karma, soul, aura, etc. there seems to be some long-developed knowledge about the nature of human relations contained in the concept of the astral. But I can't quite put this implicit knowledge into explicit words.

[3.8] On February 29<sup>th</sup> **Larry Purss** added:

I've been reflecting on the Babalawo and "participatory" consciousness. Do others see an analogy with mesmerism and magnetism. These ideas I've re-collected from Andrew Piper [Dreaming in Books]

Classical mesmerism focused on DIRECT CONTACT [immediacy] with another. What Piper refers to as "Hoffmannian magnetism" in contrast focuses on the MEDIATION of mesmerism. {Andrew argues the roots of Freudian psychoanalysis are in Hoffmannian magnetism}

Hoffmannian magnetism operates from the FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE of semiotic DISTANCE BETWEEN subjects [gaps] and posits MEDIATED rather than IMMEDIATE mesmerism. Mesmerism as semiotic distance focuses on TECHNIK [technologies and techniques] such as literary reactivation & recollection, materiality of the book, etc. Hoffman was reflecting on the more GENERAL techniks of narration, linguistic, and material techniques that were USED to SHAPE the semiotic distance.

Secondary mediating movements then BRIDGED the distance created. Piper is exploring a communicative framework. In particular the transformation of European culture at the turn of the 19th century when the culture became saturated with books and especially "collected editions". However, his exploration of the fundamental shift with understandings of mesmerism [animal magnetism] FROM notions of natural IMMEDIACY TO notions of the techniks of MEDIATED SEMIOTIC DISTANCE [and the secondary bridging of the distance created] seems to have something to add to the discussion of the Babalawo and how culture "organizes ways of dwelling in the world.

The tension between DIRECT immediacy & INDIRECT mediacy is the theme I'm questioning.