

## IN MEMORIAM

# IVAN KARP

August 27, 1943–September 17, 2011

**T. O. Beidelman**

New York University  
*tob1@nyu.edu*

Ivan Karp died shortly after retiring from his professorship in the Graduate Institute of Liberal Arts and the Institute of African Studies at Emory University. He had no intention of ending his scholarly activities. Instead, he looked forward to more research, teaching, and projects advancing studies in eastern and southern Africa, both by himself and by younger scholars from these areas. Many eulogies and detailed biographical accounts of Ivan have been published on the Internet (see, e.g., Kurin 2011). But these sources do not discuss Ivan's work, and his long and many-faceted career in anthropology. This is my aim here.

Ivan's thinking in social science was deeply rooted in sociology, history, and philosophy as well as in anthropology. Some of these interests may have derived from his early undergraduate and graduate education at the Universities of Vermont and Rochester, but Ivan's doctoral education at the University of Virginia, working with teacher and mentor Edward H. Winter, certainly provided strong grounding in classic works in British and French anthropology and sociology and in the study of kinship. Before he went to Virginia, Ed Winter had been my teacher and mentor at the University of Illinois, and he changed my life, just as he later changed Ivan's. When Ivan and I heard of one another and read each others' work, we had to meet. When we did meet in Indiana, we became so absorbed in our conversation that I missed my plane out of the local airport. We were close friends ever after.

Ivan edited two long and impressive series of publications, one for Indiana University Press titled *African Systems of Thought* (34 volumes) and, with William Merrill, a more general *Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Inquiry* (57 volumes). Few anthropologists have so generously devoted so much time and effort to advancing the work of others. The range, influence, and origi-

---

*African Studies Review*, Volume 55, Number 1 (April 2012), pp. 197–204

nality of these many works are tributes to Ivan's imagination and deep commitment to social studies. Ivan also edited or co-edited seven influential volumes of collected essays representing many scholars' thoughts on three broad and previously neglected topics which Ivan was largely responsible for calling to the attention of other scholars, especially Africanists. First, he promoted the study of African systems of thought and, more recently, the comparative study of the philosophical issues embedded in these systems, both in an African and a global context. Second, this engagement with beliefs and ideas led Ivan to promote the study of the social person and how notions of personhood and the enactment of beliefs, as well as other social goals, are bound up with the exertion of power. Third, Ivan promoted the anthropological and historical study of museums and museology, a relatively new field examining how (or if) such institutions serve the societies that are the focus of their interest and how they must change in order to ensure such support. To support these interests Ivan, sometimes alone and sometimes with others, organized important seminars and conferences of scholars concerned with African thought and societies. He also led several groundbreaking conferences on museum studies and practices. The editorial introductions to the volumes that grew out of these conferences, some written by Ivan alone and some with other scholars, constitute important surveys of the current issues and findings in these new areas. Ivan's ethnographic and analytical essays in these volumes are models of how more narrowly focused papers can illuminate such issues. In these ways Ivan was a leader who introduced and developed new directions in anthropological, philosophical, and museum studies. Few, if any, other American Africanists have played such an important role in encouraging attention to so many new directions and topics for anthropological research. The impact of these conferences and publications continues to be felt today.

I turn now to Ivan's monograph and ethnographic essays on the Iteso of Kenya. His book *Fields of Change among the Iteso of Kenya* (1978a) is based on dissertation fieldwork conducted from July 1969 to July 1971. The title derives from Meyer Fortes's concept of "social field" and the related idea of "social domain," particularly as they are explicated in his book *Kinship and Social Order* (1967). Both concepts figured in Ivan's impressive and radically new analysis of Iteso social change.<sup>1</sup> This was a perceptive analytical choice on Ivan's part because it enabled him to get a grip on some seemingly impenetrable problems with his data. His main question was how a society that had earlier been described as socially coherent could so quickly lose so many seemingly important features of traditional social organization and customary rituals and yet still seem to work. To the anthropologist, the challenge was to comprehend and describe a society that had earlier seemed well-integrated socially but now appeared so heterogeneous and inconsistent that it was difficult to describe. Following Fortes's analytical lead, Ivan distinguished among different fields of social activity and the individuals who inhabited these different spaces, such as the members of a household

or settlement, or groups that cohered because of collective economic interests or because their relations and locations made them desirable political allies. None of these groups was defined entirely by any of the conventional “social domains” of kinship, ritual and ceremonial associations, shared resources, or broader patrilineal or maternal relationships. Instead, beliefs and practices defined and grounded in these “social domains” were adopted selectively throughout a person’s life as he or she sought relations in different “social fields.”

Besides these fields being determined by strategies pursued by different groups in space, they were also determined by time, as persons aged and their ties and needs changed. Thus Ivan’s analysis also owed much to Fortes’s concept of the developmental cycle of domestic groups and the way social groups change over space and time, an idea that was also taken up by Edmund Leach, Fortes’s colleague at Cambridge. Ivan found that whether he was considering matters of kinship, affinity, economics, or politics, the values and concepts of a number of different “social domains” might be brought to bear, but they would be cited and used selectively so as to fit a particular situation. Earlier ethnographers’ analytical understanding had been limited by their tendency to see social activities as determined and expressed through only one integrated domain of beliefs and values, rather than as actions deriving from selective combinations of domains. Reality was actually more complex, and Ivan got ahead of the unconvincing analysis of the older analytical game. The same analytical technique had been employed by Evans-Pritchard when he realized that among the Nuer the language and values of kinship could have very different meanings within the field of households and settlements, on the one hand, and in the wider field of politics, on the other, in which lineage alliances and conflicts (e.g., in struggles over natural resources or in the blood feud) played quite a different role. Indeed, in 1983 Ivan and Kent Maynard wrote an elegant article about Evans-Pritchard’s landmark study that is the best clarification of the complexities of *The Nuer* (1940) ever published. Some of Ivan’s analysis is also redolent of Talcott Parsons’s concept of “social action,” a connection that may relate to Ivan’s earlier training at the University of Virginia. Suddenly, what had seemed a heterogeneous muddle of Iteso behavior became to Ivan a sensible and varied range of alternative social strategies making use of terms, values, and beliefs from an assortment of “social domains.” A later essay (1982) based in these paradigms neatly describes Iteso morality and how it affects social judgment of someone’s acts and motives.

Ivan’s very best ethnographic essay, “Beer-Drinking and Social Experience in an African Society” (1980), richly describes how Iteso beer-drinking epitomizes that society and culture. It is one of the finest essays every written about African everyday life. Ivan’s writing on Iteso spirit-possession is also some of the most perceptive work in the Africanist literature. In “Living with the Spirits of the Dead” (written with Patricia Karp, 1979) he shows how spirit possession must first be explained in terms of the sense it makes

within Iteso society and belief and how it may be a reasonable social strategy for women and not, as sometimes assumed, a symptom of maladjustment. "Deconstructing Culture-Bound Syndromes" (1985a) considerably expands these arguments. "Power and Capacity in Rituals of Possession" (1989a) synthesizes these analyses and connects women's spirit-possession specifically to their pivotal but conflicted position within patrilineal Iteso society. In "Laughter at Marriage" (1988) Ivan offers an even more profound and innovative analysis of how Iteso women's marriage rituals underscore their problematic yet central roles and how they are both the enactors and the audience of these key rituals. This is another classic among Ivan's essays on social dynamics.

Ivan's writing on social structure and ritual led him to a clearer vision about power and its relation to the social person, the subject of a collection of essays, *The Creativity of Power*, that he edited with William Arens (1989b). His views on power and personhood are summarized in Ivan's last ethnographic essay, "Development and Personhood: Tracing the Contours of a Moral Discourse" (2002), which is not about the Iteso but about all of modern Kenya. Here he examines how colonial administrators in Kenya tried to persuade, or more often force, ordinary Africans into modern social and economic development. He analyzes their ideas about their human targets, how these persons in turn saw themselves, and the struggles over conflicting ideas of what a proper Kenyan person should be like. These struggles reflected who has the power to impose and define a type of personhood, who is so weak that he or she conforms, and who is able to resist and define personhood for herself or himself. This is Ivan's most provocative and controversial article, and it should be read by anyone concerned about the many changes planned, for better or worse, for modern Africa.

Ivan's essays on museums and museology have had considerable impact on current thinking about how museums need to be reconceived in a modern multicultural world. While ethnographic and natural history museums have long been frequented by anthropologists, it is only in recent decades that anthropologists such as Ivan and his wife, Corinne A. Kratz, have considered museums themselves as subjects for ethnographic accounts and analysis.

Ivan's earliest essays on this topic set out the basic issues in current debates about the mission and relevance of museums (Karp 1991a, 1992a, 1992b; Karp and Lavine 1991b, 1993a). The most original and important essays are all by Ivan and Corinne Kratz. The most provocative and persuasive of these, "Reflections on the Fate of Tippoo's Tiger" (2000b), is an account of how museums define us and "the Other" in ways that perpetuate earlier imperialist and ethnocentric, even racist, stereotypes, sometimes blatantly, more often subtly by use of space, labeling, loss of authorship of objects, and an absence of meaningful context, even when curators strive to appear "politically correct." Two other important and related essays (Kratz & Karp 1993b and 1993c) consider the museum exhibits at the World Show-

case in the Disney complex at Epcot Center. The authors provocatively explore the ways that entertainment, education, and scholarship combine to determine how displays are conceived and viewed. Are the displays at Disney World truly informative, or are they mere diversion, calculated to grab attention and promote sales of goods and travel? Or are they both? The authors ponder differences between successful museum shows and seductive commercial popular entertainment provided by the slick and costly shows at Disney World. How might they relate to museums' concerns about attendance? Both these essays are essential reading.

I end my survey with a brief comment on my favorite essay of Ivan's, an account of the alienation and anarchic "otherness" of the Marx brothers' film "Duck Soup" and how similar elements of cultural criticism and subversion characterize African rituals and rebellions. This is one of Ivan's earliest essays (1975), yet it already conveys the admiration for and identification with outsiders and innovators that would inform so much of his later work. Many of his greatest intellectual inspirations—Meyer Fortes, Georg Simmel, Max Gluckman, and later in his career M. M. Bakhtin and Isaiah Berlin—and many scholars that he deeply admired (such as Hilda and Leo Kuper, A. L. and T. S. Epstein, Jack Simons, as well the British socialist historians, and other innovative, liberal social scientists who had fled South Africa's racist regime) were all in a sense "outsiders": some because of their Jewish heritage or their working-class origins, others because they were socialists or radicals. Ivan saw them all as thinking against the grain, a quality that he recognized and admired in the best scholars and intellectuals. This is evident in his work, and when he was older, it was shown in his hope that a love of anthropology could be instilled in a younger generation of Africans who might envision the field not as an instrument of imperialism and oppression, but as an intellectual tool for self-reflection and empowerment, for social betterment against the alarming forces threatening the continent. Ivan never lost his idealism, though it was coupled with some justified skepticism.

I end this memorial with two personal anecdotes that I hope will reveal something about Ivan's quirky personality and wit, qualities that many of those who knew him found infectious and beguiling. They reveal an amiable side of Ivan. He loved a good joke, and would even gamely put up with a joke on himself. But being Ivan, he always wanted the last laugh—one best enjoyed without hurting anyone and especially funny if his target remained oblivious to the fun that had taken place.

The first anecdote begins with Ivan and me browsing in a used book shop. There Ivan found a copy of his *Fields of Change among the Iteso of Kenya* effusively inscribed with a dedication to a friend and fellow Africanist. She had little training in African social organization or kinship and was unlikely to have grasped the point of the book. Ivan bought the volume, and we paid a visit to the friend. He handed the book to her and asked by what mistake the work had found its way out of her possession. She calmly looked into

Ivan's eyes and without hesitation remarked that she had wondered where the book had gone. She blamed its loss on her former husband, whom she had recently divorced. After we left, I asked Ivan why he had bothered to return the volume. He told me that he knew she had the aplomb and determination to sail successfully through even the worst social situation. He wanted to see how she would master this potentially embarrassing confrontation. He was amused and impressed, and in no way ceased being very fond of her. I was reminded of an interview in which Orson Welles once tried to explain to Dick Cavett that many of us love our friends because of their faults even more than because of their duller virtues.

The second anecdote involves an Africanist who wrote a scathing review of the Iteso book. Ivan was upset because the reviewer had earlier helped get the book published. He was also annoyed because the reviewer's own work on kinship struck him as dull. Later, Ivan received a notice from his publishers that the Iteso volume was going out of print and he could purchase remaindered copies for a very low price. Ivan bought a large number, packed them in a big carton, and shipped them anonymously to the reviewer. He hoped that the shipment would vex and puzzle the critic. We never learned the fate of the books.

A lot of us loved Ivan. A few years ago, I asked Ivan to promise me that he would write a good obituary for me. Old as I am now, I have had to write his.

## References

- Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1940. *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Fortes, M., 1967. *Kinship and the Social Order*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Kurin, R. 2011. "In Memoriam: Ivan Karp." *Anthropology News* (November): 20. [www.anthropology-news.org](http://www.anthropology-news.org).

## Publications by Ivan Karp

An online archive of Ivan Karp's published papers will soon be available at [http://international.emory.edu/karp\\_archive](http://international.emory.edu/karp_archive). Updates on efforts to continue the collaborative work Ivan had been doing with Corinne Kratz and colleagues in South Africa for more than a decade are posted on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ivan-Karp-Fund/133713276728450>.

1975. "Good Marx for the Anthropologist: Structure and Anti-Structure in 'Duck Soup.'" In *The American Dimension*, edited by W. Arens and S. Montague, 17–45. New York: Alfred Publishing House.
- 1978a. *Fields of Change among the Iteso of Kenya*. London: Routledge.
- 1978b. "New Guinea Models in the African Savannah." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 48 (1): 1–16.
1979. With Patricia Karp. "Living with the Spirits of the Dead." In *African Therapeutic Systems*, edited by Z. A. Ademuwagun et al., 22–35. Boston: Crossroads Press.

- 1980a. "Beer-Drinking and Social Experience in an African Society." In *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*, edited by I. Karp and C. Bird, 93–110. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 1980b. "Introduction." In *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*, edited by I. Karp and C. Bird, 1–10. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
1983. With Kent Maynard. "Reading The Nuer." *Current Anthropology* 24 (4): 481–503.
- 1985a. "Deconstructing Culture-Bound Syndromes." *Social Science and Medicine* 21 (2): 221–28.
- 1985b. With Mary Jo Arnoldi. Review of *Flash of the Spirit* by Robert Farris Thompson. *Art in America* (November): 23–27.
- 1986a. Review of *Oedipus and Job in East Africa* by Meyer Fortes. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 19 (4): 715–20.
- 1986b. "Agency and Social Theory: A Review of Anthony Giddens." *American Ethnologist* 13 (1): 131–37.
1988. "Laughter at Marriage: Subversion in Performance." *Journal of Folklore Research* 25 (1–2): 35–52.
- 1989a. "Power and Capacity in Rituals of Possession." In *The Creativity of Power*, edited by W. Arens and I. Karp, 91–109. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- 1989b. With W. Arens. "Introduction." In *The Creativity of Power*, edited by W. Arens and I. Karp, xi–xxiv. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- 1991a. "Culture and Representation." In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by I. Karp and S. D. Lavine, 11–14. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- 1991b. With Steven D. Lavine. "Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism." In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by I. Karp and S. D. Lavine, 1–9. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- 1992a. "On Civil Society and Social Identity." In *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, edited by I. Karp, C. M. Kreamer, and S. D. Lavine, 19–33. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- 1992b. "Introduction: Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture." In *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, edited by I. Karp, C. M. Kreamer, and S. D. Lavine, 1–17. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- 1992c. "Morality and Ethical Values According to the Iteso of Kenya." In *Culture and Contradiction: Dialectics of Wealth, Power and Symbol*, edited by H. G. DeSoto, 322–37. San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press.
- 1993a. With Steven D. Lavine. "Museums Must Take on New Roles in This Multicultural World." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 30 (32).
- 1993b. With Corinne Kratz. "Wonder and Worth: Disney Museums in World Showcase." *Museum Anthropology* 17 (3): 32–42.
- 1993c. With Corinne Kratz. "Islands of 'Authenticity': Museums in Disney's World."
- 1993d. Review of *In My Father's House* by Kwame Anthony Appiah. *American Anthropologist* 95 (3): 766–67.
- 2000a. With D. A. Masolo. "Introduction: African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry." In *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, edited by I. Karp and D. A. Masolo, 1–21. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 2000b. With Corinne Kratz. "Reflections on the Fate of Tippoo's Tiger." In *Cultural Encounters: Representing Otherness*, edited by E. Hallam and B. V. Street, 194–223. London: Routledge.

2002. "Development and Personhood: Tracing the Contours of a Moral Discourse." In *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, edited by B. M. Knauft, 82–104. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

### Note

1. Although Ivan's monograph was reprinted by Routledge in 2004 as part of a series of classic works in social and cultural anthropology, *Fields of Change* has been somewhat underappreciated in the field. This may be due to an organizational problem with the book, for Ivan does not clearly enough reveal the analytical or theoretical bases of his study until his concluding chapter. Were the final chapter moved to the beginning, readers would find the book better-conceived and very provocative. This flaw seems odd considering Ivan's skill when he later edited and criticized the numerous unpublished works of others in his various book series. The dates indicate that the monograph was published very soon after Ivan received his doctorate, a hastiness that may have resulted from poor professional guidance. Unfortunately, by the time Ivan was completing his dissertation, Ed Winter was not able to offer the mentoring Ivan needed to get his first work into the best shape, with fully clarified and developed presentation. Ivan's ethnographic essays on the Iteso are all well-organized and clearly formulated; even some of his book reviews amount to major analyses of works he deeply admired (1986a, 1986b).