

PREAMBLE

This book is an exploration of genealogy as a relational model or metaphor for understanding our experience of being-in-time. This existential perspective departs from the traditional anthropological view of genealogy as a framework for social organization and a moral charter for social life more typical of tribal than of modern societies. When W. H. R. Rivers published his seminal essay on the genealogical method in 1910, his focus on “systems” of thought, succession, and inheritance led him to claim that a “great difference” lay “between the systems of relationship of savage and civilized peoples.”¹ Emphasizing different modes of reckoning descent (cognatic, agnatic, or uterine), Rivers inadvertently perpetuated the popular prejudices of his day, as well as a culturalogical bias toward inferring experience from ideology rather than quotidian contexts of action and interaction. By contrast, I hope to show that underlying different cultural idioms for conceptualizing human relationships there exist universal experiences of birth, begetting, and belonging, and that, contrary to the ideal order suggested by genealogical charts, lived relationships involve oedipal and sibling rivalries, psychological complexes, knots, and double binds. I argue, moreover, that relations with ancestors always implicate, to some degree, relations with the natural environment, history, the gods, and material objects, and, like kinship, these relationships are vexed and subject to continual negotiation. While I am mindful of the deep differences between what we call tradition and modernity, my chronicles of a Kuranko family over a period of almost 150 years suggests that individual preoccupations with personal well-being, wealth, and mobility never completely occlude kinship relations and the gravitational pull of the past. Individual lives are always embedded in socio-historical contexts, and while biographies are never completely reducible to histories, the intelligibility of both oral and written history derives from their likeness to life stories.

My interest in intersubjectivity over time and space inevitably implicates my own relationships with the people I write about. Phenomenologically, one imagines “the situation of the other from the inside out” and, reciprocally, reimagines one’s own life from the standpoint of another, as described by Pablo Neruda in his *Memoirs*, when he confesses, “Perhaps I didn’t live just in myself, perhaps I lived the lives of others. . . . My life is a life put together from all those lives.”²

Here, however, we encounter the phenomenological impasse of how it is possible to know what’s going on in another person’s mind. During my initial fieldwork in Sierra Leone, my Kuranko interlocutors would repeatedly caution me against second guessing what others were thinking or feeling. “Morgo te do ka ban” (A person can never be fully understood), I would be told. “N’de ma konto lon” (I don’t know the inside story). “N’de sa bu’ro” (I don’t know what’s in the belly). It wasn’t that Kuranko did not have complex inner lives; rather, making one’s idiosyncratic experiences public risked compromising the appearance of consensus and unanimity on which *comunitas* depends. Thus, Kuranko insisted that what really mattered was a person’s behavior: whether he did his duty, performed her role, was a good friend, neighbor, parent, or chief. This emphasis on exteriority runs counter to the European bourgeois focus on fathoming a person’s deep subjectivity or plumbing the depths of the unconscious. How, therefore, could I at once respect this objectivist bias in Kuranko thought and satisfy my own desire, reinforced by a literary sensibility and an interest in psychoanalysis, to write about people’s inner experiences? How could I do justice to intrapsychic as well as intersubjective life? My dilemma was compounded by the discursive split between the social sciences, which tend to infer subjective reality from external behavior or collective representations, and literature, where the focus is on interior motivations, compulsions, complexes, and drives. If Kuranko were correct, and it was impossible to accurately read the minds of others, then anything I wrote about their subjectivity or, reflexively, about my own experiences in the field would be conjectural and unverifiable. Since I did not want to reduce the human condition to either exteriority or interiority, would it be possible to reconcile these opposing perspectives by invoking Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle? Although one must accept that the world will appear differently to us depending on the theoretical lens through which we see it, we are not obliged to make a choice between one perspective or the other. Rather, it behooves us to recognize both perspectives for the different insights they yield, though it is important to deploy them successively (juxtaposing them) rather than

simultaneously (conflating them). When I wrote my “ethnographic novel,” *Barawa*, almost forty years ago, I made the mistake of mixing the factual with the fictional.³ *The Genealogical Imagination* avoids this category error by drawing a line between “Chronicles of the Barawa Marah,” which is an ethnographic documentary, and “Fathers and Sons,” which is largely a work of the imagination. The latter therefore bears comparison with Robert Desjarlais’s *The Blind Man*, which he describes as a phantasmography.⁴

This, then, is my rationale for juxtaposing ethnography and phantasmography in a single book. By writing in an ethnographic vein, I satisfy the “reality hunger” that drew me to social science, while exploring the deep intersubjectivity that characterizes both phenomenology and literature.⁵ But beyond my ambition to overcome the traditional dissociation of science and art, I hope to show the value of seeing the world from different points of view, using different methodologies and different styles of writing. Rethinking genre and disciplinary categories, or seeing the world through the eyes of others, real or invented, may prove more edifying than persisting in the view that there is only one measure for deciding whether we have spoken truth to reality.

Considering my itinerant life, it is not surprising that I have transgressed disciplinary as well as geographical boundaries and that my writing has intermittently switched among ethnography, poetry, fiction, and memoir. Although this shape-shifting has often drawn the criticism that a jack-of-all-trades is the master of none and that such literary promiscuity risks blurring the line between art and science, I continue to believe that a human life is never a seamless whole or reducible to a single story. We lead many lives in the course of one, and there is no necessary connection between the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we create with others. That we sometimes claim to possess singular identities or pay lip service to conventional genre distinctions is not because they mirror reality but because we would find it difficult to relate to one another without them. Accordingly, a recurring problem for any writer is how to articulate personal thoughts and feelings without abandoning the social and discursive frameworks that would make this experience intelligible to others. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that scholarly and literary conventions become shopworn and outmoded, ceasing to satisfy our desire to be edified or entertained. Accordingly, scientific paradigms shift, and even the novel that emerged in the early eighteenth century is no longer novel.

In a recent review of these stylistic and paradigmatic changes in the history of anthropology, Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean refer to a “heterogeneous

corpus of writings marginal to the established canons of the discipline: memoirs, life histories and ethnographic novels, sometimes pseudonymously published, often the work of women, or people of color” that constitutes a “little tradition” that is nowadays inspiring increasing numbers of ethnographers to experiment with craft and technique (montage, graphic images, prose narrative) and rethink the practice of fieldwork (collaboration, reflexivity, engagement).⁶ Rather than presaging a transformation of ethnography into literature, these developments suggest a renewed interest in the philosophical question of verisimilitude—how we can best speak truth to life—and a deep questioning of all truth claims, not in order to finally arrive at the truth once and for all but in order to more deeply appreciate the nuanced complexity of what is at play for any person, in any moment, or in any one society. This spirit of open-mindedness echoes Michel Serres’s view that what really matters is not determining the line that divides documentary from fiction but making our ethnographies press “closer to the turbulence preceding the emergence of an intelligible, discursively knowable world.”⁷ To this end, the imagination may complement our empirical observations, and ethnography take its place among the expressive arts of fiction, poetry, painting, and cinema, giving us insights into other lifeworlds as well as other lives. This psychological displacement also finds expression in the act of writing, which goes beyond immediate experience, either by interpreting it or reimagining it. In either case, trying to put the world into words may be impossible.⁸ It is a leap of faith that bears comparison to the mystic’s dark night of the soul, unrequited love, nostalgic or utopian longing, or an ethnographer’s attempt to know the world from the standpoint of others. Yet it remains true that every writer—whether of ethnography or fiction—presumes that his or her own experiences echo the experiences of others and that his or her work may consummate a vital relationship with them.