



David and Sally Jackman Lecture Series

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2016

3:00 PM

CAC THEATRE

The Poetics of Wisdom Divination: Renewing the Moral Imagination

— Public Lecture —

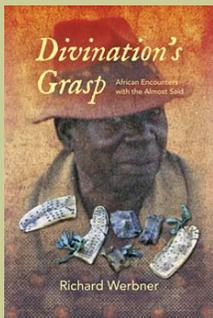
RICHARD WERBNER (MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY)



This lecture makes a critical contribution to interpretive anthropology, by arguing that its interest in the moral imagination speaks to important debates on ethics and morality. While not claiming to say anything new about anthropologists' increasingly familiar rehearsal of ideas in philosophy – as if with an eagle's eye view from Aristotle to Hume to Kant to Foucault – the lecture does pursue the underlying questions through a wealth of ethnography. This take as problematic how and why the activity of the moral imagination is as much aesthetic as moral; and how and why it engages in open-ended reflection, sometimes playfully, with uneasy consciousness, with unresolved ambivalences and uncertainties, disruptive paradoxes and contradictions.

The main argument is put through unpacking the poetics of divination and its rich, esoteric oral literature, primarily among Tswapong of Botswana. Its evocative praise poetry has no known author, is archived in the memories of experts who are diviners, and is recited selectively during diagnostic séances with interpretations in plain speech for the edification and puzzlement of the diviners' clients. Over centuries, this poetic archive, a source of imaginative moral reflection along with practical wisdom, has been highly valued in the quest for well-being by many people across a vast part of Southern Africa. Yet anthropologists and literary scholars have not taken the oral poetry seriously.

Against that, this lecture documents the acrobatic stylistics of the divinatory poetry. It shows how the poetry appeals artfully for reflexivity and heightened consciousness, how it unmask the hidden in everyday life, how and with what effects it powerfully images the ambivalence felt in the intimacies of kinship, age and gender. Clips from the lecturer's film, 'Shade Seekers and the Mixer' illuminate the imaginative moral reflection in practice.



Richard Werbner is Professor Emeritus in African Anthropology, Honorary Research Professor in Visual Anthropology, the University of Manchester, sometime Senior Post-Doctoral Fellow, Smithsonian Institution, Senior Fellow (National Humanities Center), Overseas Professor (National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka). He has recently given the Elliot P. Skinner Memorial Lecture, Association for Africanist Anthropology and the Royal African Society Lecture.

His first fieldwork was among Winnebago in Nebraska, and he has carried out extensive fieldwork in Zimbabwe and Botswana. *Tears of the Dead*, his social biography of an African family, won the Amaury Talbot Prize. His most recent books are *Holy Hustlers*, *Schism and Prophecy* (2011) and *Divination's Grasp* (2015); and his most recent films are *Burying Hallelujah* (2014) and *Caught-in-Between* (2016).

The Royal Anthropological Institute distributes his films, which are also available from Ethnographic Video Online. In 1999 on the fiftieth anniversary of the Manchester Department of Social Anthropology, he curated, *Barotseland in the Forties: Max Gluckman, a Retrospective*, a major exhibition from the thousands of Gluckman's photos now in the RAI collection.

