

IMPORTED INTELLIGENT DESIGN, OR AUTOCHTHONOUS DYNAMIC EQUILIBRIUM?

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I appreciate Dierk Lange's troubling to reply to my review. While this is not likely to bring us closer together, it might advance and broaden the debate over these significant issues for less committed parties. Even so, disputes between notions of continuity and change in practices and traditions, between static and dynamic sociopolitical *m o r e s*, and between diffusion and independent invention have been endemic at least since Europe's breakout into the wider world, and perhaps nothing that either Lange or I say will have much impact. Ultimately these discrepant views spring from individual ideas about the constancy of lifeways over long periods of time, and in face of recurring exigencies, as well as whether human history has somehow been guided or has developed in myriad spontaneous and individualized ways.

In this instance the fundamental differences of opinion between us concerns how long and how well oral traditions or rituals can survive in their pristine form. The scenario for the long-term oral transmission of texts – and rituals, after all, are texts acted out – that seems most plausible to me is one fraught with many different problematic factors: eyewitness differences from the very beginning; frequent dead ends along the way; disputes over who can speak authoritatively; differences of opinion as to receding meanings along the same way; cataclysmic events (war and civil unrest, disease, Islamisation, Christianisation, etc.) that deface or erase many forms of intellectual life; lying and trickery and forgetting. The end result – the degree of difference in content between beginning and end – is quite impossible to specify in any case, but is also hard to deny. Of course written materials undergo the same kinds of metamorphoses, but these have a better chance of being identified and a notional *U r*-text recreated.¹ This difference is absolutely crucial to our chances of recovering any part of the distant past.

In contrast, Lange lays central weight on 'the distinction between verbal knowledge and ritual', even though the latter requires as much improbably accurate transmission as the former, if not more. He argues that 'great state celebrations' are more likely to survive unscathed than personal or family rituals or basic information passed on orally. I suggest just the opposite – the more important rituals are seen to be, the more necessary it is that they be allowed to adapt to new threats and opportunities. Just look at how often national anthems, commemorations and attendant ceremonial re-enactments of

¹ However, for an disturbing example of how quickly (a few minutes!) an oral text can be transformed into several multivalent written texts, see Merrell (2006).

the past become transformed – e.g., Germany and Arminius, France and Vercingetorix, England and Arthur.

Needless to say, Lange's arguments would have been immeasurably bolstered had he been able to cite even one irrefutable example of an oral text or ritual that survived intact for as long as 3 000 years in an oral – or even in a literate – environment. To look at it the other way around, one of the major rituals in the history of the Christian West, the Catholic Mass, was dramatically and fundamentally revamped some forty years ago, replacing the Tridentine Mass of the sixteenth century, which in its turn superseded a succession of earlier liturgies (e.g. de Thorey 1994). While most of the core sentiments remained the same, even if differently expressed and weighted, there were also innumerable accretions and embellishments from version to version, as well as countless local variants. Anyone investigating the history of this ritual can determine this only because these took place in literate environments. In an oral environment only the current streamlined vernacular-language ceremony would eventually be remembered – how many young Catholics today even know (of) the Latin ritual? – so taking today's Mass to reflect the primitive Mass accurately in contour and performance would be a mistake of monumental proportions.

The self-same pattern holds true for baptism, the archetypal Roman Catholic sacrament, which underwent frequent and radical alterations through the ages. A recent study speaks of 'the diversity we find in early centuries in the emerging baptismal rituals'. This diversity continued and ramified throughout the various Christian churches as it responded to evolving theological views. It was only the Council of Trent that 'curtailed many local usages, and discouraged any cultural adaptation'.² Thus the rudiments of the pre-Vatican II baptismal rite hark back only to the sixteenth century, not the first.

I do not, because I cannot, deny that there might have once been some influences from Canaan and Carthage to the south and west.³ It is not implausible that sporadic contacts across a less arid Sahel and Sahara took place from well before the Common Era. But I emphatically repudiate the argument that practically all existing forms of religious and political life were formally introduced then and reject even more strongly the idea that these were then remembered and reproduced faithfully for 3 000 years or more, even if firmly rooted in ritual. To do so runs against a wealth of evidence that these things do not happen. Not least, it imputes to African societies an inability – or at least an unwillingness – to respond to arising contingencies. It revivifies and magnifies the justifiably discredited 'ethnographic present', whereby certain societies do not act and react pragmatically – as more favoured races do.

² Spinks (2006:157–158). This work is largely a study of the regional and temporal adaptations of baptism until the Council of Trent.

³ This possibility raises two perplexing questions. What was Pharaonic Egypt's role in all this? And why did writing not transfer with all the other ancient Near Eastern paraphernalia?

Instead, Lange repeatedly invokes ‘social complexity’ – real or imagined – as an indication of outside influences, even though the inanity of this approach has been demonstrated a thousand-fold. The idea of an ‘ancient Near Eastern state in West Africa’ is of a piece with classic hyper-diffusionist arguments. Olmec heads, impressive stone edifices, St Thomas, sunken continents, Solutrean flints, and a host of other mechanisms – most of them ideologically inspired – have been dragooned into these arguments. Although a few have survived, if not unscathed, most have sunk of their own weight, undermined by meretricious claims that they demonstrate direct influences rather than casual far-flung trade, accident, coincidence, or imagination. Could African states not develop ‘social complexity’ without input from the ancient Near East? China did, Mesoaamerica and the Andes areas did, South and Southeast Asia did.

J.A. Brinkman did observe that – as of 1976 anyway – Burnaburiaš was the earliest ‘reasonably well attested’ Kassite ruler over Babylon, but other sources have become available that tell a different story.⁴ This, of course, occurs frequently. Interestingly, Lange now relegates Burnaburiaš, described in “Ancient kingdoms” (2004:252) as ‘the first king of the king list of Kebbi’, to the status of ‘a possible candidate for the onomastic ancestry of Burumburum’. Unfortunately, this concession is no more than prolegomenon to name-games extending back to Sargon of Akkad. For Lange, these display ‘disturbing resemblances and coincidences which are far from being purely accidental’.⁵ To me they are a recrudescence of games played since Herodotus, although I can accept the ‘coincidences’ part, which does not disturb me at all.⁶

I can only reiterate, then, that “Ancient kingdoms” is too often a farrago of unconvincing comparisons of names and ritual activities. When Lange argues that ‘[t]he similitude or identity [sic] of a dynastic name in Africa and the ancient Near East should not only raise doubts and suspicions but also intellectual curiosity as to their possible connection’, he is inviting those enamored with the mystique of long-term untainted memorization to descry ‘disturbing resemblances’ hither and yon. Rest assured, I am all in favour of both doubts and suspicions, but I can only direct these at Lange’s frantic search for vague or non-existent combinations of letters and actions based on choosing and viewing sources through a prism of his own design.

Every year, hundreds of books and articles appear instancing collective historical re-memorizing. These investigate various ways by which evolving presents reconstruct their pasts to suit similarly evolving and unaccommodated exigencies, rituals notwith-

⁴ Brinkmann (1976:467). Brinkman went on to mention some counterevidence not noted by Lange.

⁵ I fail to see, for example, the resemblance that Lange postulates between two names on the Assyrian King List and two fictitious rulers of Kebbi; in any case, most Assyriologists treat the earliest portions of the Assyrian King List as etiological rather than historical. Once opened, this is a hard door to close; why not equate Gunguma, the first ruler of proto-Zaria, with Gungunum, the fifth ruler of Larsa? Or associate the town of Wudi (Lange 2004:551) with the Chinese Emperor Wudi (140–87 BCE)?

⁶ Lange promises a fuller explanation in a forthcoming paper on ‘the Assyrian factor in African history’.

standing. Those who would advocate for an unaltered recollection of the past, even for relatively short periods, must become more familiar with this literature lest they continue to argue in a vacuum that undermines their efforts.

It is, of course, auspicious that Lange proposes finally to deposit his field notes, since he has been arguing on the basis of their putative content for some time. Just the same, I have to disagree absolutely with his *apologia* that those who collect field notes earn the perquisite of retaining custody and access to these 'as long as they decide to do so without being expected to make [them] immediately available to the scientific community'. This impudently self-serving manifesto allows those doing fieldwork or laboratory work to operate with impunity to their collective hearts' content. Scholarship cannot be allowed to work in this way; claims should always be supported by immediately accessible sources. Lange's *cordon sanitaire* around his field notes makes it impossible to assess his use of his own primary and unique sources. He cannot expect belief without also providing convenient opportunities for testing. Full stop.

To conclude, where I see recurrent and reciprocal influences characterizing the past 3 000 years, Dierk Lange sees one early and intensive era of introduced intellectual domination, followed by three millennia of inertness. My own notion of oral tradition – and of ritual – is that it is inherently and constantly dynamic in all ways, changing constantly in response to new stimuli, but also that we cannot hope to trace most of these changes.⁷ It is, as I said above, a matter of personal philosophy – and, of course, the convergence of independent strands of evidence – or, as in this case, the absence thereof.

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⁷ Although sometimes we can for a ritual 'formally initiated' in 1971 that has already acquired 'an oral history that places its origins in antiquity' see Cancel (2006).

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