

## Anthropology of Mysticism : An Intellectual and Intimate Portrait of Edie Turner

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### POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

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### Introduction

In the interest of truth, it must be stated that I knew Edie ("never call me Edith") Turner as a friend. I met her at an American Anthropological Association conference in Atlanta, Georgia, some years ago. We sat at the same table in a restaurant for a session of, I believe, senior anthropologists. I did not recognize the elderly lady who kept commenting to me on the presentations and discussions as Edie Turner. I smiled politely while trying to follow what was being said. Slowly, I realized that it was Edie Turner who was talking to me steadily *soto voce*. I am not sure what I had said that caught her interest but ever after she was kind to me and often quoted me in public, singling me out for praise. She contributed material to some of my edited publications and I was on her panels and she on mine over the years. When I spent part of a summer in Charlottesville, Virginia, on a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, I got to spend more time with Edie and hear more of her anthropological experiences and her relationship with Victor Turner, her husband, and her large family.

Edith Turner was born in Ely, England as Edith (Edie) Lucy Brocklesby Davis on June 17, 1921 and died on June 18, 2016 in Charlottesville, Virginia. Her father was an Anglican priest, the Reverend Dr. George Brocklesby Davis and her mother was Lucy Gertrude Davis (formerly Howard). Edith Turner described herself and her work this way:

"I am an anthropologist engaged in the study of ritual, religion and consciousness. I have

been researching the field of symbol and ritual for 58 years, formerly in collaboration with Victor Turner. My theoretical interests have developed from Turner's 'anthropology of experience,' a field that has been spreading in anthropology to narratology, humanistic anthropology, and the anthropology of consciousness. Good anthropology rests on humanism - that is, respect for the ideas and religions of other cultures and, where possible, the willingness to experience through the eyes of others. Analysis therefore seriously has to take into consideration local exegesis (interpretation), and local statements of experience. For ourselves, we may look upon these experiential moments as crossing points into a culture's familiar world of the spirits. Human life is not limited to the mundane and, conversely, the body itself is often the medium through which people experience the spirit." (2016)

More mundanely, Edith Turner was a humanist anthropologist who famously indeed specialized in ritual, religion and consciousness. She focused her attention on the role of symbol and ritual. Originally, she worked with her husband, Victor Turner (1920-1983). She continued his work after his death but also extended it, including his interest in the 'anthropology of experience,' a field which the Turners aided in popularizing in anthropology and related fields. Edie held humanism is the royal road to good anthropology. That humanistic anthropology is based on experience and humanism was beyond question with her. It was an article of faith. The anthropologist must seek to experience a culture through the skin – the skin, so much as possible, of those who belong to that culture. Real anthropology, for Edie, must rest on local interpretation and experience. The anthropologist is a learner, a student, and must learn from those who live the culture daily. Thus, she said the spirits were real, and the anthropologist ignores the spiritual at his/her own peril. Simply put, body and soul must be considered. Failure to do so, puts any interpretation at risk. Edie's specializations were many. They included humanistic anthropology, ritual, healing and all which that implies, shamanism, priests, spirits and their owner, rites of passage, festivals, Ndembu African ritual, Iñupiat healing, and shrines and healing in Ireland. For many years Edie Turner edited *Anthropology and Humanism* and she authored many books and articles, including *Heart of Lightness: The Life of an Anthropologist* (2006), *Among the Healers: Stories of Spiritual and Ritual Healing Around the World* (2005), and contributed to many works including *Bridges to Humanity* (1995).

Edie spoke to me often about her love for her husband, Victor Turner. She met Victor Turner in 1942 on a blind date, which her brother Charlie arranged. She notes they met in the exact center of Oxford. Charlie and Victor were conscientious objectors who were conscripted and did non-combatant work during World War II (Engelke, Matthew, 2000). They were married six months later. Edith notes that all the anthropology she learned, she learned from Victor. That is very sweet but I would note that she went beyond Vic in many ways ; for example, her mysticism was much deeper than that of Vic's. However, Edie told me that she often saw the spirit of Victor Turner and that it often aided her in continuing her anthropological work and ideas. Indeed, her work is a continuation and expansion of that work.

Finally, Edith Turner (2012: 42-43) discussed the role of music and sport in generating *communitas*. She states in opening, “We can find a key to the nature of *communitas* through the flow of music, one of the greatest endowments that gives joy.” Edie notes that music, the flow of music, has great power. It draws people together. Along with sport, it generates flow, a force lifting people behind the mundane and into the beyond. I have sought to provide an example of how jazz has been a means for generating *communitas*, of helping people “be in the zone”. She notes, with Charles Darwin, that music brings heaven to earth. She also stated, “The characteristics of *communitas* show it to be almost beyond strict definition, with almost endless variations. *Communitas* often appears unexpectedly. It has to do with a sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning.... *Communitas* can only be conveyed through stories....” What more can be said?

### **Influence**

The work of Edith and Victor Turner has inspired anthropological explorations in numerous ways, some of which they may not have expected but which, having known Edith Turner well, I do not expect she would reject. Edith always encouraged people to go and follow what they love. She also saw the world as sacred, filled with a holy love. James Hopgood’s “Back Home in Indiana: The Semiotics of Pilgrimage and Belief in Honor of an American Icon” (2000) applied the concept of both pilgrimage and liminality to a very secular topic, which had extra secular value, almost religious, for its devotees. Earlier, in “The Ritual of Jazz Performance” (Play & Culture 1988) I adapted the Turnerian concept to a performance of Fela Kuti in his club, The Shrine. The liminal concept of betwixt and between worked well and Fela’s claim of the music being sacred made sense. Fela also stressed the distinction between religious and sacred.

Lévi-Strauss and Victor Turner are but the most prominent among the many distinguished social anthropologists whom Van Gennep has influenced. One is tempted to view the disparate way that influence emerges through each of these scholars in dialectical terms, something that Turner himself hints at with a touch of humor in one of his own writings (Turner, 1974b). Turner begins his work on ritual with a definition that adheres rather closely to Van Gennep’s. ‘A ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests’ (Turner, 1973, p. 1100). In a series of exegetical works, however, Turner extended Van Gennep’s insights, including both situations of change in the Third World and recreational areas in the modern one. He did so primarily through the development of the concepts of liminality and antistructure. Without ever losing sight of a ritual’s properties, indeed in the very process of delving into the depths of its properties, Turner focused on Van Gennep’s middle stage of the rites of passage’s three stages, transition. In Turner’s work, it is both the key to understanding ‘separation’ and ‘reincorporation’, the other stages of the rites of passage, and even ritual itself. Turner was concerned with ritual and its concomitant symbols as a process. These could not be wrenched from their appropriate contexts. Doing so deprives them of coherence and,

consequently, meaning. Indeed, his own amendments in a self-quote are most revealing:

“I could not analyse [these] ritual symbols without studying them in a time series in relation to other ‘events’ [regarding the symbol, too, as an ‘event’ rather than a ‘thing’], for symbols are essentially involved in social processes [and I would now add in psychological processes, too]. I came to see performances of ritual as distinct phases in the social processes whereby groups became adjusted to internal changes [whether brought about by personal or factional dissensions and conflicts of norms or by technical or organizational innovations], and adapted to their external environment [social and cultural, as well as physical and biotic]. From this standpoint, the ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force in an activity field. Symbols, too, are crucially involved in situations of societal change – the symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends and means, aspirations and ideals, individual and collective, whether these are explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from the observable behavior. For these reasons, the structure and properties of a ritual symbol become those of a dynamic entity, at least within its appropriate context of action.” (Turner, 1967, p. 20 quoted and commented on in Turner, 1974b, pp. 54-55). Symbols, then, are not only essential parts of rituals, they are what rituals are all about ; that is, they interpret and convey the meaning of reality to a community. Rituals are both symbolic in themselves and a means for conveying symbolic messages about survival. Moreover, they construct and interpret reality to members of a sociocultural system. Furthermore, these meanings are never static and are always used dynamically to adjust group members to changing demands of the ecological system, including psychological and sociocultural elements. These forces are most clearly revealed in the liminal phase of the rites of passage among traditional societies and in liminoid activities among modernizing and modern societies. The liminal phase is one of ‘betwixt and between,’ taking on characteristics of the sacred. Its participants are associated with contradictions. For example, they are seen to encompass “life and death, male and female, food and excrement, simultaneously, since they are at once dying from or dead to their former status and life and being born and growing into a new one’ (V. Turner, 1974b, p. 59). It is a period of potentiality in which normal distinctions are intentionally disregarded and initiates possess sacred power, for all things are, symbolically, possible. This was a point Edie built upon time after time. In the symbolic world all things are indeed possible.

Edie Turner set the program for this article in her statement which extended the meaning of *communitas* beyond that which Victor had done:

“The characteristics of *communitas* show it to be almost beyond strict definition, with almost endless variations. *Communitas* often appears unexpectedly. It has to do with a sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning... *Communitas* can only be conveyed through stories...”

My work with jazz musicians demonstrates the truth and value of Edie’s insight. Suffice it to say that jazz musicians not only tell verbal stories, as I have learned over and over through personal contact, they also tell musical ones. Dizzy Gillespie, for example, speaks of jazz as

the most unselfish music in existence. 'Jazz is like something sacred. It is unselfish because you make the other guy sound good-even sacrificing yourself' (personal communication, November 1986)." Hugh Lawson, who was a pianist, spoke freely of the spiritual moments that come over him while performing (personal communication, 1986). These moments can come unbidden but there are certain exercises that can induce what is almost a self-hypnotic state in which performances unheard of can be generated. Often, however, the music alone is sufficient to produce these trance-like states. Ali Ryerson, a flautist, after expressing skepticism regarding the existence of the ecstatic state in performance, convinced herself by relating several personal experiences with these states (personal communication, 1986). These might come as often on a bad night as a good one. They tend to come unbidden. Indeed, the mark of a true professional is the ability to keep performing on bad nights. The feeling is that the professional does not wait until the spirit moves to perform but rather courts the spirit through professionalism (see Rouget, 1985, for a discussion of this concept). This is indeed a profound statement.

The mundane world may have limits but the spiritual one does not. Imagination and inspiration take us beyond the merely practical. As Shakespeare said

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

*Hamlet* (1.5.167-8), Hamlet to Horatio

In many ways, Edie dwelt in that world but with a foot also in the everyday world. She refused to see a split between these worlds, arguing that one informed and was part of the other. Her approach influenced too many to name, lest I leave out someone. The session in her honor, which I co-sponsored with Marjorie Snipes (American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, 2017) was packed, with people sitting on the floor and, literally, out the door in the hall. It was a tribute to the influence of Edie and Vic Turner.

## Conclusion

Edith Turner is admirable for many things. She became a major anthropologist without an anthropological degree, a rarity in the modern era. Moreover, she became a major figure who was also a major influence on her husband, Victor Turner. On his death, she extended his work, taking it in unforeseen areas. She elaborated on his work in liminality, with all due respect to Van Gennep. The notion of the sacredness of the betwixt and between of the ritual of passage was extended to what had been a separate secular area. She, along with Victor Turner, Mary Douglas and E.E. Evans-Pritchard made it respectable to be a religious believer and an anthropologist. Indeed, Edie was always inclusive, seeking to unite seemingly antithetical people and positions. She did not hesitate to embrace the sacred and the secular, finding them two sides of the same coin, like body and soul. Similarly, she sought to understand the relationship between the spiritual and the mundane, looking for a synthesis in areas where others saw opposition.

I had the privilege of knowing Edie for several years, about 30. She was always open to my

ideas, even if I did not always follow her down some paths I was wary of treading. She was always way ahead of me but always kindly and encouraging. She loved to teach, like Chaucer's pilgrim. Indeed, it can be said of her as well: "Gladly would she learn and gladly teach". She taught generations of anthropologists, always with humor, gentleness, and wisdom.

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