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The Making and Unmaking of of the Haya Lived World: Consumption, Commoditization and Everyday Practice

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INTRODUCTION: AN ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

Changing Perspectives

From plateau atop the escarpment in the Muleba District one can look out over a long slope to the valley below. This valley presents a vast hilly expanse, a field of broad savanna plains interspersed with rocky outcrops and compact villages whose verdant flora stand out sharply against the surrounding terrain. The sloping face of this escarpment leads down beyond the valley and villages to the western shores of Lake Victoria. In the Haya language (oluhaya) Lake Victoria is Lwelu, "The great out- there", and from this plateau it does indeed seem a distant place that lies beyond the lands tended to by Haya villagers.

It should be clear, however, that such a view is only possible from a particular perspective, a perspective that is not merely a topographical vantage point, but more importantly a particular way of perceiving this region. This description of that view is representative of what was often my own way of looking at a landscape. And the very idea of a "landscape", approached in this way, presupposes a distance between an observer and a visual scene, and a perspective that exemplifies a separation between subject and object. There are, however, ways of apprehending this region that do not reduce it to an observable backdrop. These Haya villages and the lands between them are not merely an arrangement of positions, for they are dynamically integrated into a unified order of space and time. Haya do, in fact, recognize distinctions between the regions I referred to. Valleys and plateaus present different life possibilities for those that reside in one or the other. The savanna grasslands that predominate are not

treated like the villages they surround. But these contrasts within the region are conjoined in the course of actual Haya activity and experience. Savannah encroaches on untended village land, or villagers may attempt to reclaim farmland from the desiccated bush. Migrations from plateau to valley, or from village to village occur with every generation as social relations alter the contours of these physical spaces. The material environment thereby becomes incorporated into the practical organization of Haya society and culture.

The same is true for Lake Victoria. While the lake is distinctly "out-there", it also clearly a part of the regional world configured in Haya experiences.¹ As a place of trade and travel, Lake Victoria is also a means of establishing concrete connections between the Kagera Region² and the rest of Tanzania and East Africa as a whole. The image of rural isolation on the shores of the imposing lake implicit in the objectification of the "scenic" landscape, is again undermined by Haya interactions with their world.³ Through these interactions Lake Victoria becomes, in fact, metonymic of the interpenetration of "local" and "global" communities, a "great out-there" that is simultaneously inseparable from the lives of rural Haya villagers.

¹ NOTES

I discuss the relation between "outside" and "inside" in some detail throughout this work. Chapter 1 deals directly with the interpenetration of these locations, as suggested in this example.

²

The Kagera Region in Northwest Tanzania is the political division in which rural Haya communities reside. I lived in the Muleba District within this region in the course of my research.

³

My characterization of this kind of "visual objectification" and its "point of view" derives from Bourdieu's renowned critique of "objectivism" in the social sciences (Bourdieu 1977:96 ff).