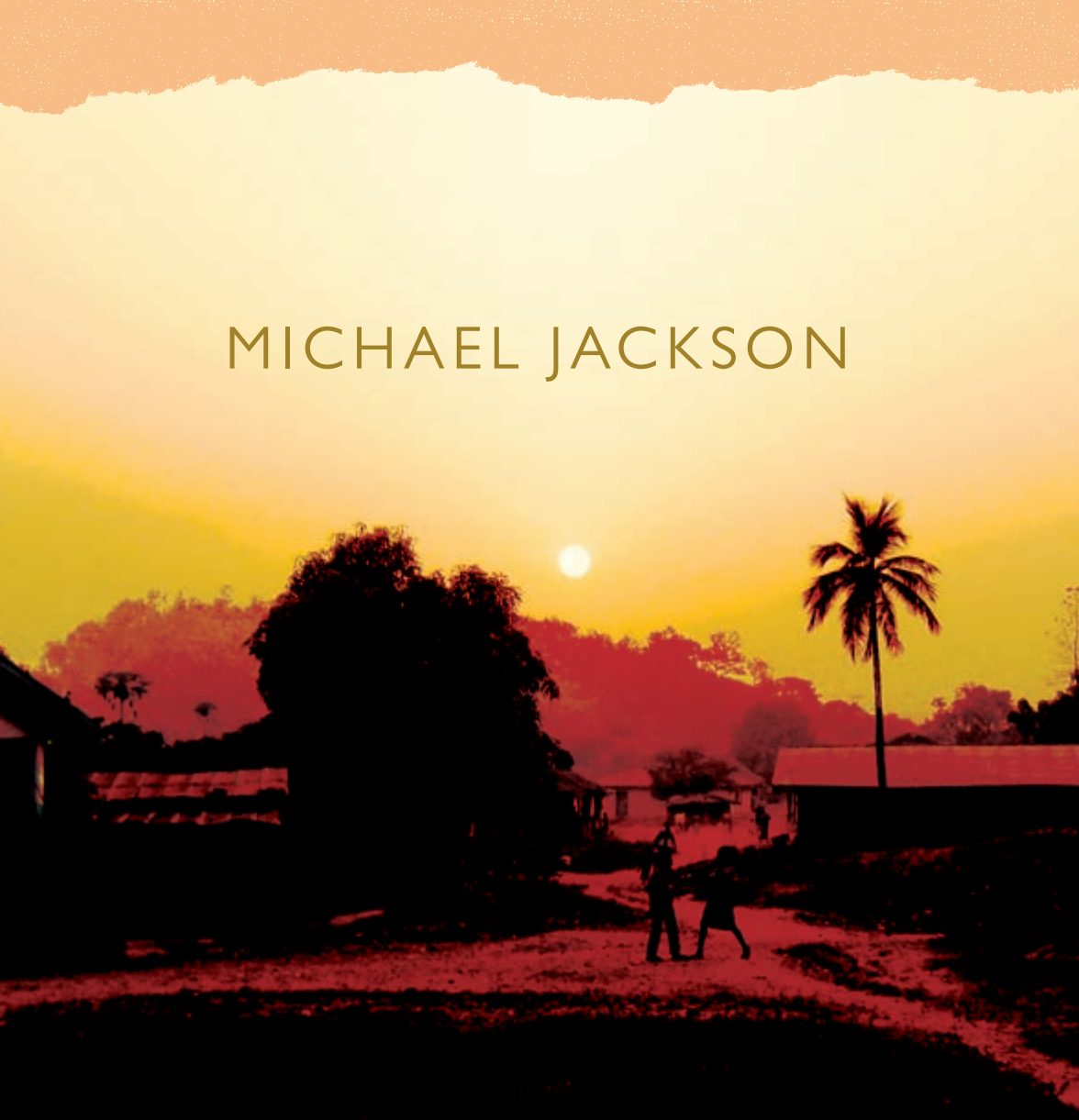
MICHAEL JACKSON



The Palm at the End of the Mind

relatedness, religiosity, and the real

THE PALM AT THE END OF THE MIND

ALSO BY MICHAEL JACKSON

Ethnography
The Kuranko
Allegories of the Wilderness
Barawa, and the Ways Birds Fly in the Sky
Paths Toward a Clearing
At Home in the World
Excursions
In Sierra Leone
The Politics of Storytelling
Existential Anthropology
The Blind Impress
The Accidental Anthropologist
Minima Ethnographica

Fiction
Rainshadow
Pieces of Music

Poetry
Latitudes of Exile
Wall
Going On
Duty Free
Antipodes
Dead Reckoning

Edited
Things As They Are
Personhood and Agency

THE PALM AT THE END OF THE MIND

Relatedness, Religiosity, and the Real

MICHAEL JACKSON

Duke University Press

Durham and London 2009

© 2009 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by C. H. Westmoreland
Typeset in Monotype Bembo
by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data
appear on the last printed page of this book.

CONTENTS

Preface xi

1. Ancestral Roots
   The Real 1
   Only Connect 2
   95 Irving Street 4
   Reconnecting 8
   Missed Connections 11
   Tertium Quid 14
   The Dead 19
   Mind the Gap 23
   The Genealogical Imagination 29
   The Penumbral 34
   After Midnight 38
   Second Skins 40
   On Not Severing the Vine When Harvesting the Grapes 42
   Corrupted Con-texts 46
   The Broken Heart 48

2. Primary Bonds
   Incarnations 52
   The Matrixial 57
   A Letter from Athens 61
   Emily's Journal 62
   Beginnings 65
   The Pain in Painting 69

Paths 73
Parallel Lives 75
My Lunch with Arthur 81
The Wellness Narratives 84
Night 94
Outside the Window 98
"What Really Matters" 99

3. Elective Affinities
Knots 103
Marina del Rey 106
In Limbo 108
In Media Res 108
In Wellington 112
The Enigma of Anteriority 116
Survivor Guilt 119
Ventifact 123
Measured Talk 129
Heaven and Hell 131
Manifest Destiny 134
The Nature of Things 148
The Road of Excess 159
The Eternal Ones of the Dream 162
Strange Lights 165
Recognitions 168
The Other Portion 173
It Happens 176
Ships That Pass in the Night 178

4. Competing Values
Café Stelling 182
Value Judgments 184
The Bottle Imp 189
Marginal Notes 193
A Storyteller's Story 195
Big Thing and Small Thing 200
Sacrifice 203
Prince Vessantara 208

The Girl Who Went Beneath the Water 210
Ill-Gotten Gains 216
Is Nothing Sacred? 221
Return to the Café Stelling 229
Metanoia 232
The Place Where We Live 236

Acknowledgments 239

PREFACE

In the early 1980s, a religion reporter for the *New York Times* took a year's leave from journalism and enrolled in several courses at the Harvard Divinity School. What began as an academic interest in comparative religion became a spiritual journey in the course of which Ari Goldman reappraised his faith as an Orthodox Jew and explored the meaning of religion in radically different traditions and communities throughout the world. Twenty years on, Goldman's account of his sabbatical year, *The Search for God at Harvard*, is still selling well, at least in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and when I read this book in the summer of 2005, not long after taking up a teaching appointment at the Harvard Divinity School, I toyed with the possibility of writing something along the same lines. As an anthropologist, I was intrigued by whether something one might call "religious experience" could be identified in all cultures and all people (including skeptics like myself), and what meaning could be ascribed the term "religion" when the people with whom I had sojourned as an ethnographer in West Africa and Aboriginal Australia had no equivalent concept in their languages. Mindful of Talal Asad's argument that Euro-American notions of religion tend to be uncritically grounded in post-Enlightenment, Judeo-Christian thought, and that "religious experience" can never be reduced to institutionalized "religious belief,"[1] I decided to turn my attention to those critical situations

1. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), chap. 1. Jacques Derrida also cautions against a "globalatinized," Greco-Roman bias in our thinking about religion. Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 4, 30. It should also be noted that current notions of religion and of religions as do-

in life where we come up against the limits of language, the limits of our strength, the limits of our knowledge, yet are sometimes thrown open to new ways of understanding our being-in-the-world, new ways of connecting with others. Whether such border situations are quintessentially "religious," "spiritual," "historical," "social," or "biographical" may be beside the point,[2] for though such terms help us describe the conditions of the possibility of our experience or help us retrospectively explain our experience to ourselves and to others, the meaning of all human experience remains ambiguous, containing within it both the seeds of its own comprehensibility *and* nuances and shadings that go beyond what can be comprehensively thought or said. To capture this sense of experience as occurring on the threshold between what can and cannot be entirely grasped—intellectually, linguistically, or practically—I use the image of the penumbral (from the Latin *paene*, almost + *umbra*, shadow) with its connotations of a phenomenologically indeterminate zone "between regions of complete shadow and complete illumination," "an area in which something exists to a lesser or uncertain degree," and "an outlying or peripheral region."[3] I also take

---

mains of intelligible truth(s), rather than faith and passion, are largely products of eighteenth-century Enlightenment rationality. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 37–50.

2. Jaspers contrasts *Grenzsituationen* with *Altagssituationen* (everyday situations). While we are able to "gain an overview" of our everyday situations and get beyond them, limit situations "possess finality"; "they are like a wall against which we butt, against which we founder." Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie*, vol. 2: *Existenzerhellung* (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1932), 178–79. For an account of *Grenzsituationen* in English, see *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Edith Ehrlich, Leonard H. Ehrlich, and George B. Pepper (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 97. Though Adorno treats the term "frontier-situations" as part of a jargon of authenticity—on a par with "being-in-the-world," "individual existence," and "heroic endurance"—a way of "usurping religious-authoritarian pathos without the least religious content," I see it as a way of escaping from the two dominant discourses of our time, the first that reduces all meaning to political economy, the second to religious belief or doctrine. In my view, it is precisely this tendency to politicize or intellectualize religious experience that the existential concept of *situation* helps us to overcome. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 152.

3. From the "penumbra" entry in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

my cues from Wallace Stevens's late poem "Of Mere Being," where "the palm at the end of the mind" stands "beyond thought," on "the edge of space," while a gold-feathered bird sings in the palm, "without human meaning, without human feeling, a foreign song."

Border situations not only imply a radical break from the known; they presage new possibilities of relatedness that often transcend specifically interpersonal ties. Lost souls variously hit the bottle, do drugs, distract themselves in work, appeal to God, or seek out some wilderness, real or symbolic, where they may take refuge and regroup. I refuse to pathologize any of these transmutations, or interpret connectedness with nature, the cosmos, the divine, or an imagined community as escapes from social reality, mere opiates, illusions, or defenses. That people throughout the world speak of abstract and far-reaching relationships in terms of kinship—using the terms "brother" and "sister," "father" and "mother" to connote ethnic and religious identifications, or imagining political leaders, ancestors, and Gods as parental imagoes—does not mean that kinship is the sole source of our experiences of kindness. And the human capacity for forming bonds knows no bounds, encompassing other persons, objects, animals, abstract ideas, ideologies, possessions, and even the earth or cosmos.[4]

This broad field of connectedness is my point of departure for exploring fields of experience that overflow and confound the words with which we conventionally describe the world, and for describing the subtle ways in which one human life shades into another, and the shallows of the familiar shelve into unfathomable depths. But in moving from a consideration of the way fate unfolds through genealogical time, to the mystery of elective affinities, and to the interplay of opposing notions of value, I waive the conventions of lineal argument and

4. One sees this vividly in initiation ritual, where neophytes die to their childhoods and are reborn as members of a moral community with allegiances to ancestral values. The classical Hindu "stages of life" from student, householder, hermit to world renouncer succinctly summarize this movement from personal to transpersonal connectedness, with the *sannyasi* (renunciant) sloughing off earthly attachments in order to achieve union (*yoga*) of self (*atman*) and cosmos (*Brahman*). And the same dialectic, in which relative attachments are eclipsed by absolute bonds, is spelled out in Luke 14:26 where Jesus says, "If any man comes to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

the search for firm or final conclusions, embracing Wittgenstein's view that to say something is often less interesting than to disclose connections,[5] not only because statements can never convey everything that is existentially and most immediately the case but because our most illuminating glimpses into the nature of things emerge in the shifting spaces *between* statements, descriptions, and persons, and in the course of events. Hence perspicacious presentations, juxtapositions, analogies, poetic images, epiphanies, and anecdotes may best do justice to the ephemeral and transitive character of experience and carry us into those penumbral regions where the unnamable begins or, as Wallace Stevens puts it, "The search for reality is as momentous as the search for God."[6]

5. See Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 302–3.

6. "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 481.

1. ANCESTRAL ROOTS

The Real

I am listening to Osvaldo Golijov's *Ayre* on my car stereo. Along Concord Avenue, the rising sun is like a gobbet of molten glass burning through the wintering trees. As I park my car in Cambridge, Sephardic street cries and a poem in Arabic are still echoing in my head. It is only a short walk from the parking garage to my office at the Center for the Study of World Religions. Before settling to work, I gaze at the reproduction of one of Paul Cézanne's paintings of Montagne Sainte-Victoire that I have pinned to my wall. I can hear the wind soughing in the pines and smell sage and thyme. I check my e-mails. My daughter Heidi has sent me a sonogram of her baby at thirteen weeks. She also tells me about an Aboriginal painter whose works I should see. On Google I track down images of Paddy Kuwumji Jawaiyi's emu dreamings from the East Kimberleys. I am moved by something I cannot name. What do these things have in common? This strange musical work by a Jewish composer, born in Argentina but now living in the United States. This French painter who returned time and time again to the landscapes of his natal Provence. This fetal image of my first grandchild. This Aboriginal painter whose elemental canvases take my breath away. What moves me to think that these are all of a piece? Is it that they carry me to somewhere I have never been before, or somewhere I once knew and have forgotten? Harbingers of the new, they are nonetheless reminders of something very old. I have a sense of being grounded in something I can only call "the real" that connects my life to the life of the earth itself, its generations succeeding one another over time, its multiple geographies and cultures. Is this what the Greeks

called *apo-kalypto*, the sudden disclosure of the ordinarily hidden relationship between ourselves and that which came before us, that will follow us, and that lies beyond our ken?

Only Connect

That I have become so preoccupied by connectedness and transmigration may have something to do with the vicissitudes of leaving Europe and resettling in the United States as a "resident alien." Perhaps it is because I have uprooted myself so many times in the course of my life that I am skeptical about identity and definition, preferring to explore transitive or transitory phenomena, including the fields of relationship within which our sense of self emerges and is transfigured—fields that extend far further in time and space than many of us are prepared to acknowledge. If I repudiate a priori distinctions between *types* of connectedness—familial, affinal, economic, religious, political, etc.—it is because, for me, the most intriguing thing about human relationships is that they include relations not only with other persons but with abstract ideas, imaginary beings, and inert objects. Moreover, they are in constant flux. Much as we try to name, contain, and control our interactions with the world around us, the interplay between self and other has a life of its own. It is this intersubjective life, rather than any one life, that I feel compelled to explore.

Nowadays, the word "connection" is practically synonymous with networking, and we often think of sociality in corporate or technological terms. But there are limits to what we can accomplish with the digital gadgetry with which we currently chat, communicate, and go about our business. In London, my friend Sewa Koroma struggles to resolve a political crisis in his natal chiefdom in Sierra Leone, making calls on his cell phone, urging friends and kinsmen to do his bidding, but exasperated that he must live in England to earn money when he is needed back home. On the T from Boston to Harvard Square I read a Corporate Networking Collaborative advertisement: "We help you make those right connections by pointing you to the right event. Networking is about building connections, and the best ones are made in person." The ad reminded me of Sewa's dilemma and sharpened my sense of the difficulty we have in reconciling the

familiar, face-to-face worlds of which we have direct experience with the far-reaching and remote worlds that also determine our fate. There was another advertisement on the T that also caught my eye—a dating service, promising romantic connections. That dating agencies have failed to come up with any scientific system for matchmaking also brought home to me the gap between what can and cannot be achieved by reason or will. Was I old-fashioned in thinking that we set too much store by the idea that our lives can be consciously programmed, that we are losing the knack of letting go, allowing nature to take its course, accepting that connections are often made, insights given, and life most fully realized when we open ourselves up to that which lies beyond our knowledge and control? In his ethnographic study of networking in contemporary Japan, Brian Moeran notes that people are "always looking for suitable excuses or justifications for being together." Although age, place of origin, kinship, and education are, as elsewhere in the world, the usual ways of establishing common ground, people occasionally come up against limits, and it is here that mystery begins.

When all else fails, there is always the fallback position of "fate" (*go-en*). A man may pore over a visitor's name card, examining the fine print, asking questions about the other's past and present life, searching for a connection. How long has he been in his company? So he must have graduated from university in such-and-such a year (indicating a possible age connection)? And where did he go to university? Does that mean he is from such-and-such region of Japan? Perhaps he knows so-and-so in such-and-such a company who also went to the same university and is from that part of the country? And so on, and so forth.

This kind of inquiry borders on the hopeless when conducted of a foreigner in Japan. Once age has been found wanting as a method of bonding, there is little likelihood of the foreigner being able to satisfy other criteria like kinship, geographical origin, or university. A potential line of help exists if the foreigner is married to a Japanese, because questions can then circle around the spouse. But generally the only way in which the informal relationship can be formally sanctioned is when, having socialized with the foreigner sufficiently to be able to judge whether he or she wishes to continue the connection or not, the Japanese can exclaim with unconcealed pleasure, "It's fate that's brought us together, isn't it?"

> The Japanese word for fate (*en*), a little like the Greek *moira* (thread), literally means "connection."[1]

In these fragmentary and inconclusive sallies, I suppose I was trying to fathom the kinds of connections, so crucial to our well-being, that refuse cognitive closure or codification—the bonds of close friendship, for instance, of parenthood, of elective affinity, and of love. The sense of inevitability and fate that the Greeks captured in the image of a thread spun at a person's birth, binding him or her forever, or that Norse and Anglo-Saxon traditions depicted as a web or weave, hanging over every man, whether on the battlefield or in the "fetters" and "bonds" of pain, love, and death. And then there was the question that crops up in both Norse and Vedic texts, as to what powers, human or divine, can loosen the knots that hold us or magically tie up the forces that constrict our freedom.

95 Irving Street

Whenever I feel the need to stretch my legs and clear my head, I go for a walk through the streets behind the Center where I work, often passing 95 Irving Street, where William James lived between 1889 and 1910 and wrote his most enduring work. There is a commemorative plaque on the stone-gray picket fence, and the house, still a private home, has been well maintained. Sometimes my passing contact with this house brings to mind a passage in James's writing that resonates with my own work in progress and helps me clarify what I am struggling to say.

One cold March morning, for instance, I was passing the house just as a City of Cambridge Recycling Collection truck was moving laboriously down the street, as if to remind me that I was simply putting back into circulation ideas that James had set down one hundred years ago. "Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it," James declared in a lecture given in Oxford in the spring of 1908, adding that by reality he meant "where things happen."[2]

1. Brian Moeran, *The Business of Ethnography: Strategic Exchanges, People and Organizations* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 108.

2. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 96–97.

One can, I think, readily understand why James's notion of radical empiricism, with its emphasis on relations as well as relata—flights and perchings, rivers and embankments, verbs and substantives, conjunctions and disjunctions—proved so difficult to spell out and so irksome to many of his readers, for who in his right mind would identify reality with things that cannot be readily grasped or systematically named, with phenomena outside the reach of reason? Yet James insisted: "Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a *more* that continuously develops, and that continuously supercedes them as life proceeds. The relations, generally speaking, are as real here as the terms are."[3] Nor is it the world that lies about us that is refractory to comprehension and control; it is also the world within. "Whatever it may be on the *farther* side, the 'more' with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on the *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life."[4]

There is probably no human being who has not been intrigued and troubled by the mysterious relationship between his or her own immediate world—a world of direct experience—and all that lies beyond it. It is never simply a matter of acknowledging or naming this extramundane dimension of our existence; it is most vitally a question of our

3. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 35. I have discussed at length elsewhere the ways in which James's relational view of reality anticipates D. W. Winnicott's work on "transitional phenomena," replacing notions of ontologically discrete domains like self and other, object and subject, inner and outer, with the image of "transitional" or "potential" space as an indeterminate zone where various ways of behaving, thinking, speaking, and feeling are called forth from a common pool, combining and permuting in ever-changing ways, depending on who is interacting and what is at stake. See D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974); Michael Jackson, *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2005). Also, directly relevant to this theorizing is Hannah Arendt's concept of the "subjective in-between." *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 182–84.

4. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Signet, 1958), 386. There are, of course, profound similarities between James's notion of "the more" and Jaspers's notion of "the Encompassing" (*das Umgreifende*). Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, trans. William Earle (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997).

relationship with it—how we reckon with it, draw on it, and control it. Of this liminal zone,[5] John Dewey observed:

> The visible is set in the invisible; and in the end what is unseen decides what happens in the seen; the tangible rests precariously upon the untouched and ungrasped. The contrast and the potential maladjustment of the immediate, the conspicuous and focal phase of things, with those indirect and hidden factors which determine the origin and career of what is present, are indestructible features of any and every experience.[6]

Although we often assume that reason enables us to grasp the unseen intellectually, if not actually, Dewey declares that this invocation of scientific rationality is as much a "magical safeguard against the uncertain character of the world" as the so-called mumbo-jumbo and superstition we attribute to premodern peoples.

Dewey's remarks echo certain passages in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* where he too speaks of the ways in which our private and mundane lives are embedded in wider fields of being from

5. My project may be seen as a *phenomenology* of what Victor Turner called liminality, for my emphasis is on the various ways in which temporal, spatial, personal, and cultural in-betweenness is *experienced* in human life, both through conventional conceptual or ritual manifestations *and* inchoate, oneiric, poetic, and imaginary expressions. Yet I eschew a phenomenology that defines religion in terms of an allegedly sui generis modality of experience or existence, since what is important, in my view, is the unstable *relationship*—the *écart*, the cusp, the broken middle—*between* our experience of immediate and nonimmediate fields of experience—a mutually constituting and fluid relationship that lacks any essence that can be tagged with one particular label. Hence my dissatisfaction with the psychoanalytic notion that religious experience is grounded in a yearning for the sublime, pre-Oedipal phase of fusion or union with the mother, with Otto's notion of "the wholly other" and "the numinous," with Eliade's notion of an "abyss" that divides "two modalities of experience—sacred and profane," and with Csordas's thesis that religious experience springs from a "primordial sense of 'otherness' or alterity." Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine in Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 14; Thomas Csordas, "Asymptote of the Ineffable: Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 2 (2004): 164.

6. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), 43–44.

which we draw inspiration and vitality. Though there are countless ways in which any one of us construes and interacts with this nonimmediate realm, James prefers to speak of it in fairly neutral terms as "a wider self," or "the more," or simply "life" rather than as God. As such, it bears a family resemblance to what Freud called the over-I, Jaspers called the encompassing, and Heidegger called Dasein. As a pragmatist, James is less concerned with whether our language actually captures the essence of the elusive world that lies about us, since what is most crucial are the *entailments* of what we say and do for our own well-being and the well-being of others. "Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is He? are so many irrelevant questions," James writes. "Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life is, in the last analysis, the end of religion."[7]

Basic to all these reflections is the view that one's well-being depends on one's relationships or connectedness to an "elsewhere" or "otherness" that lies beyond the horizons of one's own immediate lifeworld. This "other" world is sometimes identified with the dead, and ritual labor enables the living to fuse their being with ancestral being in a life-giving union.[8] Sometimes, as in traditional Christianity, it is a realm of divine power and presence, associated with the empyrean.[9] Sometimes it is identical to the natural environment of forest, bush, and stream.[10]

7. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 382.

8. Among the Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land, for example, *maarr* is the invisible and ancestral power "necessary for the health and fertility of the Yolngu world, including the environment in which people live." Through ritual labor, members of Yolngu clans cooperate in drawing this power out from the totemic sites where it resides, so that it "can be spread wide and be beneficial and bring a sense of well-being to all who participate with a good heart." Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 103. For the people of the Daly River region of northern Australia, ceremony and *wangga* songs "provide the primary locus of human engagement with the ancestral dead," and this ceremony and song are associated "with liminal states of being—dream states, and the states of being in the twilight zone between life and death, or between childhood and adulthood." Allan Marrett, *Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 3, 5.

9. The Indo-European word for a deity is *deiwos*, from the root *diw/dyu* (the bright sky or daylight) and designating a sky god.

10. In the Upper Amazon, the forest stands in the same relationship to people as the moiety from which they receive wives. While the forest provides food,

Although, as Alfred Schutz observes, most philosophy and religion attempt to reduce the extramundane "to a concept, to make it graspable and accessible to accustomed experience, to tame it,"[11] it remains at the limits of what can be thought or said, encompassing our relationships with ancestors, nature, God, foreigners, and even the unborn.[12] Martin Buber speaks of the religious, not as "something that takes place in man's inner life" but rather "between man and God, that is, *in the reality of their relationship*, the mutual reality of God and man."[13] But we have to go even further in our thinking, acknowledging the limits of laws, the limits to which nature can be controlled: the confusion, turbulence, openness, and instability that compose the "liquid history" of the world[14]—clouds massing and dispersing; a thunderstorm breaking and just as suddenly passing; a stream running muddy then clear; the sea leaving its always different rib patterns on the hard ironsand.

Reconnecting

Thirty-six years have passed since I first did fieldwork in Sierra Leone, but I remember as vividly as if it were yesterday the burnished surface of the porch at Abdul's house in Firawa where I installed myself every morning, dunking dry cabin bread in a mug of instant coffee while, in the mist-swathed village, bleary-eyed men with blankets drawn about

---

allies provide women, which helps explain why the forest is said to smell like women, and entering the forest is compared to sexual intercourse. Rules governing the exploitation of forest resources—game, medicines, fruit, and narcotics—are also analogous to rules governing correct sexual conduct. Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *The Forest Within: The World-View of the Tukano Amazonian Indians* (Dartington, Devon: Themis Books, 1996), chap. 6.

11. Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Lifeworld*, vol. 2, trans. Richard M. Zaner and David J. Parent (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 101.

12. Ibid., 194–95.

13. Martin Buber, preface to the 1923 edition of *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 4 (emphasis added).

14. I am echoing and paraphrasing Michel Serres's *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

their shoulders stood around improvised fires, chewing on lophira twigs that served as toothbrushes or murmuring greetings to passers-by.

As the sun came up and the mist began to lift, Abdul would set up his treadle sewing machine at the other end of the porch. I would hear the voices of Tilkolo and Mantene (Abdul's wives) from the backyard as they winnowed or pounded rice. A rooster crowed, a child cried, a mortar thudded rhythmically into a wooden pestle, Abdul's sewing machine rattled into life, and villagers passed by on their way to the bush for firewood or the stream for water.

My fieldwork followed the course of people's everyday lives. Like the local weaver's cotton threads, gathered and anchored to a large stone in the middle of the compound and emerging from his loom as a narrow strip of country cloth, the various strands of my own work were gradually coming together: a detailed genealogy of the Barawa chiefs, notes on a rice-flour sacrifice to family ancestors, a detailed account of a funeral, lists of totemic clans and their far-flung affiliations, data on the composition of labor cooperatives, marriages, and ongoing court cases, not to mention the mysterious relationships that diviners formed with djinn.

All this data afforded me glimpses into the warp and woof of Kuranko social life. But rather than this metaphor of society as a web or net, Kuranko used the image of paths: paths worn into the earth by the traffic of bare feet—evidence of the social connections that linked different family compounds in a village or scattered kin within a chiefdom; paths that led uphill—whose steepness was a metaphor for the difficulty of childbirth and labor; paths that were closed by makeshift barriers, fallen branches, or collapsed bridges—images of the falling out of friends and neighbors; paths that petered out in swampland or darkness—signifying distrust and alienated affections.

The "social death" of paths is a perennial Kuranko preoccupation. Illicit love affairs, conspiracies, and unresolved quarrels, or disrespect between the young and old, women and men, commoners and rulers, clansmen and their totemic animal, "spoil" the amity that ideally obtains among members of a community. Even the months of separation during the rains, when families live on isolated farms in the bush, may cause estrangement. Accordingly, a lot of Kuranko ritual life is concerned with symbolically opening paths, cooling hot hearts, clearing the air, and celebrating what binds people together despite their dif-