PIERRE FATUMBI VERGER AS SOCIAL SCIENTIST

Peter F. COHEN

Introduction

Someone asked me very seriously the other day
whether Pierre Verger really existed or if he was not
just another Bahian invention.
Jorge Amado (1997 : 7)

Pierre Fátúmbí Verger was a Frenchman who devoted more than half of his 93-year life to the study, promotion and practice of African and Afro-Brazilian culture[1]. His written legacy includes some of the most original and valuable contributions to these fields. At his death in 1996, Verger left behind him some 30 books, 100 articles, over 60,000 photographic negatives, films and audio recordings and thousands of pages of unpublished ethnographic data.

This massive body of work is unusual in several respects, perhaps the most striking of which is its highly eclectic nature. Verger delved into virtually any field that interested him, regardless of whether or not he had any formal training in the area. "Photographer, ethnographer and babalawo", exclaimed ethnographer Alfred Métraux, "what a Renaissance man!" (Le Bouler 1994:256) –long before Verger's publications in history, linguistics and ethnobotany[2]. Verger published historical research more than a decade

[1] I would like to thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Ford Foundation and the Columbia University Institute of Latin American Studies for funding my fieldwork in Brazil, and the Fundação Pierre Verger for its gracious assistance in my research. Thanks to Ibéa Atondi, Marion Aubrée, Brunehilde Biebuyk, George Brandon, Barbara L. Cohen, Lee Cohen, C. Daniel Dawson, Kenneth Dossar, Henry John Drewal, Angela Lühning, Ivor Miller, Barbara Price, Dolores Shapiro and Robert Farris Thompson for their reading and encouragement. Finally, my deepest gratitude to Lisa Earl Castillo for her invaluable ideas and tireless assistance with the final text.

[2] The classification of African plants by Dr. Burkill of Kew Gardens in London largely corresponds to the work done by Verger decades earlier (Lühning 1999:31).

before receiving his doctorate in history, and until the end of his life continued to write in fields in which he had no official certification whatsoever. Besides his ethnographies and histories, he published art books, children's books and diverse articles in newspapers and popular magazines. He worked in various media, including photography, film and sound recording. His work spanned several continents and incorporated documents and oral data in at least six languages.

Roger Bastide affirmed that "P. Verger is the man who currently knows the candomblés best" (1958 : 9n.1), and Métraux claimed that "few ethnographers can flatter themselves at having penetrated African societies of both the Old and New World in their intimacy as deeply as he" (1957 : 9). Yet despite his long and distinguished career, his prodigious, varied and pioneering output, and the great admiration that he earned from a handful of respected Africanist and Afro-Americanist scholars, Verger remains a relatively obscure figure in the social sciences.

Paradoxically, Verger's reputation appears to be greater among the people with whom he conducted his fieldwork –in Brazil, Nigeria, and the Republic of Benin– than among academics in his native France. "Although celebrated in Brazil", notes Jérôme Souty, "he remains somewhat unknown in France, and his passing went almost unnoticed. A few articles hastily cite him a photographer or a specialist in Vodun or Afro-Brazilian cults" (1998 : 221). Indeed, a Bahian magazine rhetorically asks: "Who does not know Pierre Verger in this city of Bahia?" (Verger, 1980 : 5), while in Nigeria he is "Pápá Fatumbí" (Akinjogbin, 1968 **:** xxv), and in Benin "the White Elder."[1] Yet in France, Théodore Monod recently pleaded: "Cannot one wish for an exceptional scholar who has given so much to French ethnographic science that a modest plaque might one day commemorate the memory of that famous individual?" (Verger, 1995 : 6).

This article will explore some of the implications of Verger's methodological and theoretical positions –through an examination of Verger's own writings and statements, and the testimonies of those who knew him– in an attempt to address this paradox. It will begin with a contextualization of his work in terms of his life history, for his impressive output was less the product of a 'professional' life than the direct outcome of personal experience –so much so that he could confidently affirm that he had never worked a day in his life (Souty, 1998 : 228).

---

[1] Lucie-Mami Noor, personal communication.

A Life of Letting Go[1]

...the dream was to let oneself go without knowing why; to live and not to destroy the pleasure that one can have with sterilizing analyses followed by explanations as false as they are pseudo-rational.
– Pierre Verger (1992:183)

Pierre Edouard Léopold Verger was born in Paris on November 4, 1902, to a bourgeois family of Dutch-Belgian ancestry. Expelled from school for lack of discipline at age 17, he worked in his family's printing business until his mother's death in 1932, when he made his first voyage. On that trip, a 1500-kilometer walk around the entire perimeter of Corsica with photographer Pierre Boucher, Verger began a new life as both a traveler and photographer.

He crossed the Soviet Union, spent a year in Tahiti and toured the South Pacific[2]. In Paris in 1934, he met Georges-Henri Rivière, of the Musée d'Ethnographie de Trocadero (today the Musée de l'Homme), and was soon put in charge of the museum's photography lab, working with ethnologists Marcel Griaule, Germaine Dieterlen, Michel Leiris and Alfred Métraux. He next visited the United States, Japan, China, the Philippines, Singapore, Colombo and Djibouti, bicycled through France, Spain and Italy, and crossed the Sahara by camel, reaching what are today Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin. Refusing an exclusive contract with the London *Daily Mirror* in 1936, he toured Columbia, Martinique and Guadeloupe, the Dominican Republic, Mexico and the US. In 1937, he crossed Russia to China, Korea (then under Japanese attack), the Philippines and French Indochina. It was in order to expedite his Russian visa for that hastily planned visit that he changed his stated profession from "photographer" to "ethnographic photographer", thus becoming ethnographer.

In 1939, he travelled through Mexico, Guatemala and Ecuador. Enlisting at the outbreak of the War, he crossed Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Brazi, to arrive in Dakar in 1940. There he met Director of the Institut

---

[1] Except where specified, most of the information in this section can be found in Verger (1995b).

[2] On the island of Bora Bora, for him "end of the Earth" (Interview with Dias 1995 : 30), he entered the hut where he planned to live: "the first thing I saw was a calendar printed by my father. It was a shock. That day I understood that you cannot escape your past" (Interview with Roegiers 1989).

Français de l'Afrique Noire (IFAN), Théodore Monod. After the fall of France, he went *via* Guinéa Bissau and Cape Verde to Brazil. In 1941, he was in Argentina and in 1942, in Peru. In São Paulo in 1946, he met Roger Bastide, who encouraged him to visit Bahia, which he had read about in a book by Jorge Amado.

He arrived in Salvador on August 5, 1946, and soon met such people associated with the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé as painter Carybé, author Jorge Amado and anthropologist Vivaldo da Costa Lima. In 1947, he sent some Candomblé photos to Monod, who offered him a grant to study their African origins. In 1948, he accompanied Métraux to Surinam and Haiti. At a Candomblé ceremony later that year, he met *mãe-de-santo* (Candomblé priestess) Mãe Senhora and told her of his planned trip to Africa. Four days later, she presented him with a necklace of the *orixá* Xangô. Two months after that, he was initiated into the *Sàngó* cult in the towns of Ifanhin and Sakété in Dahomey. Returning to Dahomey on a second grant from IFAN in 1949 after a tour through central Africa, he discovered historical documents on the slave trade that marked the beginning of his historical research. On March 28, 1953, in the town of Ketu in Dahomey, he was initiated as a *babaláwo*, or Yoruba diviner, and thus become *Fátúmbí*. ("He who is reborn through *Ifá*"). "Pierre Verger died," he reflected, "and *Fátúmbí* was born" (1995 : 121).

In 1954, he published *Dieux d'Afrique*, a book of annotated photographs illustrating through the correspondences between *òrìsà* worship on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1957, he published "*Notes sur le culte des Orisha et Vodoun à Bahia la Baie de Tous les Saints au Brésil et à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves*" in the *Journal d'IFAN,* combining a review of the existing literature with comparative historical and ethnographic data, including an extensive collection of texts and photos from both Africa and Brazil. In 1962, he was admitted into the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) –four days under the age limit. In 1966, he completed "*Flux et Reflux de la traite des esclaves entre le Golfe du Bénin et Bahia de Todos os Santos, du dix-septième au dix-neuvième siècle*" (1968), a work incorporating documents from three continents in five languages to document the unique bilateral exchange that developed between these two coasts and the reciprocal cultural influences thereby generated. Defending this work as a *3ème cycle* doctoral thesis under Fernand Braudel, he received

his doctorate: "For finding some documents on Brazilian influences in Africa I became a Doctor"[1].

In 1971, he was named *Directeur d'Études* at the CNRS. In 1974, he was hired as Visiting Professor at the *Universidade Federal da Bahia* (UFBA) and in 1977, at the University of Ifé. He was contracted a second time as Visiting Professor at UFBA in 1980. He died in 1996 in his modest home in Salvador upon completion of his final book, *Ewé*. This study of some 2,000 Yoruba medicinal recipes and spoken verses associated with over 3,500 plants was the fruit of forty years' experience as a *babaláwo*. "I don't try to understand things", he remarked in shortly before his death, "I try to live them"[2].

An Officialization by Initiation

I am not a doctor, I am a pagan.
– Pierre Verger (1965:108)

Verger's academic career was inextricably tied to his career as an initiate of Yoruba religion. His first IFAN grant financed his initiation in Africa, which in turn facilitated his initiation in Brazil. By the time he published the results of his fieldwork he was already a *babaláwo*. It might be worth asking whether his academic trajectory was less determined by the priorities of academia than by those of Yoruba religion.

This would shed light on several peculiarities of Verger's career, such as the extremely long periods of time he took to publish his research –nearly ten years between his entry into Candomblé and his first monograph, seventeen years between the beginning of his historical research and his dissertation defense, and forty years between his initiation as a *babaláwo* and the publication of his ethnobotanical study)[3]. His slowness to produce was notorious among his academic friends, and Métraux's diary notes of a 1952 a lunch with Paul Mercier and Georges Balandier: "We talk about Verger who, we are all sure, will never write anything" (Métraux 1978 : 350).

---

[1] Interview with Dias (1995:34).

[2] Interview with Pic (1995:46).

[3] He never completed a planned work on *Ifá* divination, based on thousands of pages of notes taken over decades.

Another sign that Verger was an initiate first and an academic second can be found in the difficulties he had with his academic collegues on the issue of secrecy. “If Bastide is the man who says all he knows knowing that he knows little”, writes Monique Augras, “Pierre Verger is unquestionably the one who knows much and is too often silent” (1992 : 52). After forty years of studying Candomblé, Bastide wrote : “Our lack of knowledge may also have something to do with the law of secrecy” (1978:241). His letters testify to a reliance on Verger and desire to collaborate with him, as well as to the latter’s reluctance to publish on sensitive subjects:

I regret that our two names do not figure fraternally one beside the other. But I understand your scruples, for this work will be published in Portuguese. The important thing is that afterwards you write a book on Candomblé in French ... Until the very last moment I will leave a blank next to my name, if after mature reflection you see no danger for your future research (Morin 1994 : 42).

Yet while Bastide praised Verger as an “ethnographer who respects the law of the secret” (1992 : 11) and signed his letters “your brother and respectful subordinate in the law” (Morin 1994 : 42), his frustration with his initiate colleague was occasionally palpable:

You have all the luck! Now you've got the secret I have been searching for in vain, the list of leaves of the Orishas! But with you, it is only a secret that goes from silence to the next, for you stubbornly refuse to share your knowledge. I wish you had you never said anything in the first place! (Morin 1994:42).

Monod too expressed irritation with Verger on this point, as Métraux wrote to Verger after a meeting with Monod: “Your initiation was discussed with a touch of irony leading to praises of your African knowledge, although several times Monod complained of your slowness to produce and worried about your esoteric scruples” (Le Bouler 1994 : 181). Verger replied, “Monod’s reaction about me is legitimate. Oh, how hard it is to reconcile the heavy obligation of the secret with the Institute’s hunger for publications!” (Le Bouler 1994 : 183). Métraux’s journal tells of his own problems with Verger’s infamous initiate integrity: “We are told of a *zangweto* [*sic*.] ceremony to take place this very evening. Not without hesitation, Verger invites me along, provided that I do not seek to penetrate the secrets” (Le Bouler, 1994 : 160). Verger himself referred to the “traditional Yoruba societies” about which he was “only authorized to speak with reserve” (1982b : 256).

Verger's implacable allegiance to his research community and corresponding indifference to the concerns of social science drew mixed reactions, as vividly described in this letter from Métraux :

An at once agreeable and disagreeable fact which I must communicate to you : at a breakfast with Braudel, Heller, Herskovits and Métraux, the aforementioned Braudel, for no apparent reason, began singing your praises and publicly expressed his hope to attach you to the École Pratique des Hautes Études, of which he is a Director and myself an ornament. Upon hearing this, the aforementioned Herskovits flew into a diatribe against you and expressed his astonishment that anyone could take your knowledge seriously. Luckily his French is slow and I was able to interrupt him and change the subject, for his ideas were most unpleasant[1].

If Verger was marginalized in the academic community, he himself took some pains to distinguish himself from academia. His interviews abound in such statements as: "Personally, I have a rather pejorative opinion about intellectuals" (Verger 1980:6), and : "Anthropologist ? I hate the word!"[2] A playful letter from Métraux illustrates both Verger's aversion to academia and the respect which his friends in academia had for him:

I attended Bastide's doctoral defense. Your name echoed several times off the vaults of the Sorbonne. You have been promoted to "source" and "authority" ... Verger, Verger, you're losing it. Next it will be the Doctorate Honoris Causa ... and then Professor (Verger 1992:188-9).

At a time when scientific research in France was almost exclusively government sponsored, Verger's involvement with African institutions at times bordered on outright subversion, as in 1948 when he danced before the altar to *Sàngó* in Sakété with a large igname on his head:

The colonial authorities looked askance at me ... Luckily, I was already with the *Institut Français de l'Afrique Noire* and there in principle to study

---

[1] Le Bouler (1994:301). Verger himself wrote: "Herskovits, the great patron of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, did not like me. I rained on his parade, for Brazil and Africa were for him preferred "fields" in which to conduct observations on (to use his terms) the phenomena of enculturation, acculturation and even transculturation of peoples in their places of origin and transported elsewhere ... and I committed the unpardonable sin of bringing them news of one another!" (Le Bouler 1994:296). For more on the Verger-Hersjovits relationship, see Lühining's (2000) contribution to this volume. See also: Le Bouler (1994:294); Lühning (1998:324.n17).

[2] Interview with Aguilar (1993:6).

the "strange" values and customs of the local population ... If I had not been with IFAN, I would have been taken for an agitator and thrown out of the country. Can you imagine? A white gentleman making a spectacle of himself with them and prostrating himself?[1]

Even Monod, Verger's benefactor in academia, once exclaimed in desparation: "I did not obtain research grants for Pierre Verger simply so that he could convert to paganism!" (Verger 1982b:257).

Verger himself noted the irony that in eschewing the hierarchies and norms of his own society, he had ultimately embraced those of another: "That's right, I have become a true conformist. I seek Yoruba titles and honors while I have nothing but contempt for those that I might obtain from my own social milieu" (1994:229).

According to Reis: "He liked to call himself an anti-academic, despite being a professor in the Anthropology Departament of the Universidade Federal da Bahia – a detail of his resumé that he rarely mentioned" (1996:6). While casually dismissing his doctorate – "I managed to become the person I never wanted to be" (Dias 1985:34) – Verger claimed that his initiation as a *babaláwo* "facilitated and in a certain sense officialized" his research (Verger 1997:16). He also used his insider credentials in seeking funding: "There's the argument of the "depth" which I can attain in these little-known areas," he wrote in a 1956 letter regarding a fellowship from the British government, "through my affiliation with *Ogboni*, my post as a *babaláwo* of *Ifá*, my adherence to *Xangó*, *Babá Egun*, *Oro*, etc. The friendships that I have in the traditional *milieux*" (le Boulet 1994:231).

Verger's career clearly raises questions about the criteria by which a researcher acquires legitimacy and by which anthropological knowledge is produced. Furthermore, despite his unusual professional history and antagonistic position towards Western academia, Verger's personal statements convey a clear and consistent theoretical and methodological position, which can be perceived in virtually every aspect of his knowledge production process; from the relationship to subjects in the field to the presentation of data.

---

[1] Interview with Azoulay (1993:18).

A Fieldwork Agenda of Communion

> *I … have so often heard him mentioned with so much affection by the iâlorixás, ogans and filhas-de-santo as a spiritual brother.*
> – Roger Bastide (1995:12)

The originality of Verger's approach as a researcher begins with the very motivation behind it. While most social scientists arrive in the field armed with years of academic training and specific research objectives, in Verger's case it was the other way around – his field experience led him into academia. Participant-observation was for him not a tool, but an end in itself. "What I like when I travel," he reflected, "is to live with people and to see them live in a way different from my own, for I was interested in what was not me, or perhaps in what was me in others."[1] An anecdote from his stay in Peru illustrates at once his ethnographic instinct and the particular use he made of it:

> The locals were extremely reserved, until I found a way to break the ice. The various groups of Indians gave one another ironic nicknames, some of them very funny. I made a list and from time to time, in the market or on trains, I would pull it out. Thus won over, they revealed the names of the others. That's how I managed to break down a few barriers.[2]

Here we see ethnography being used as a means of creating rapport, rather than the reverse. Verger was to make a career and a way of life out of this technique.

Although Verger wrote prolifically, "the knowledge he produced was not primarily intended for the intellectual community of his land of origin," observes Souty, a practice "contrary to academic custom" (1998:232). Verger always maintained that his initial entry into ethnographic research was a direct consequence of his personal involvement with his 'research community'. "If I took numerous notes," he recalled of his first fieldwork in Africa, "it was not with the intention of publishing them, but to show them to my friends in Bahian Candomblé" (Le Bouler 1994:61). His IFAN grant was

---

[1] Interview with Garrigues (1992:171).

[2] *A Tribuna* May 31, 1989 (p.6).

"only a pretext" that enabled this personal search:[1] "I never thought about the scientific side of the research when I accepted it," he maintained: "I identified and continue to identify with the descendants of Africans."[2] Thus he "managed to become considered by them as a sort of 'representative' on the Coast, entrusted with finding the 'tradition'" (Le Bouler 1994:85).

The difference in Verger's objectives from those of other researchers is reflected in the relationships he developed in the 'field', a fact noted by Bastide:

> No-one could better help us to know and love the cults than Pierre Verger, he is not an 'outsider' [but] belongs to the world of the Candomblé*s*. He has been accepted by the blacks of Bahia as a true brother – a white brother (Bastide 1995:11)

This identification is clear in Verger's own statements. Following his initiation, he wrote Leiris, "I am now almost completely Nagô" (Le Bouler 1994:179). Interviews at the sites where he lived and conducted his fieldwork suggest that the identification was reciprocal.[3] The King of Oshogbo, where Verger lived during his time in Nigeria recalls: "He was part of the family" (Dibie and Guicheney 1997:130), and the King of Sakété, where Verger was first initiated in 1948, affirms: "Fátúmbí was no outsider here; he was 100% Sakétéan. He stayed with the people; he did everything with the people. He knew all the secrets of Sakété and all the cults. He proved his fidelity with everyone."[4] Verger's picture today hangs in temples in both Africa and Brazil.

If we accept both the high quality of Verger's rapport and its relative uniqueness in social science fieldwork, it remains to be seen what implications it may hold for the practice of social science. The differential access to information and corresponding restrictions on its diffusion have already been discussed above. Another aspect involves the ability to gain access to informants in their 'natural state', free from the uncomfortable impression that they are being observed or analyzed by an outsider. Indeed, Mariano suggests that "Pierre Verger achieved what seems to be the goals of

---

[1] Interview with Gottschal and Guerreiro (1994:40).

[2] Interview with Garrigues 1992:173).

[3] See Lisa Earl Castillo's article in this journal for a vivid perspective on Verger from a Bahian Candomblé initiate (Earl Castillo 2000).

[4] Personal interview in Sakété, March 27, 2000.

any anthropologist facing her object of study to let him to be natural and spontaneous" (1996:2).

According to Bastide, Verger's fieldwork method represented an improvement on the well-known method of participant-observation:

American sociologists have coined a word to designate a research technique that consists precisely in identifying with the milieu in which one studies; "participant observation." Yet Pierre Verger is better than a participant-observer, for the word "observer" still implies a certain barrier that splits the ethnographer in a rather unpleasant way into "outsider" and "insider." Pierre Verger's knowledge is the fruit of love and communion (1995:12).

This quote suggests the superiority of emotional or spiritual bonding as a basis for the gathering of social science data; not merely because of the increased access to information it affords, nor because it enables informants to feel more relaxed, but because of the difference it makes in the mindset of the researcher himself. Furthermore, it acknowledges the existence of another dimension in the fieldwork process than a purely intellectual one; one that involves both the researcher and informant as total individuals.[1] Verger did in this sense anticipate by decades, as Lühning suggests, some of "the most recent developments in anthropology regarding a closer interaction between the studied subject [and] the observer" (1999:352). Yet his position was more radical still. For he questioned the very basis of anthropological study itself as a means of acquiring knowledge, and ultimately managed to publish thousands of pages based on his field research while maintaining that he had ever "studied" anything at all.

The goal of Verger's participation was not to study but simply to *participate*: "I never wanted to study anything," he insisted, "What I wanted

[1] It might be worth noting in the context of this "communion" Victor Turner's concept of c*ommunitas* and of human interaction as the confrontation of living, creative totalities. Noting the implications of such a view for the practice of fielwork research, Turner wrote: "I would plead with my colleagues to acquire the humanistic skills that would enable them to live more comfortably in those territories where the masters of human thought and art have long been dwelling. This must be done if a unified science of man, an authentic anthropology, is ever to become possible (1974:17-8).

was to live with these people"[1] Starting from the principle that "you only learn by being with others."[2] he developed a fieldwork methodology based on simply *being there.* "Fátúmbí was different from other researchers," recalled one person from Sakété, where Verger was first intiated in Africa. "because Fátúmbí was *there*."[3]

A Methodology of Not Asking Questions

> *If I was able to go so deeply into the knowledge of these traditions, it is because I never asked for explanations. I had no idea, thank God – if He exists! – of the kinds of questions I might have been able to ask.*
>
> – Pierre Verger[4]

Verger attributed his own success in both creating rapport and gathering data to a technique that was central to his fieldwork methodology; that of not asking questions: "I learned very early not to ask useless questions," he reflected in his final work, "my unfeigned indifference with the diviners ... and healers ... was an unpremeditated factor that led me to success in that field" (1997:15). Verger believed that questions were indications of some *a priori* idea or interested thinking which only biased true observation. He saw his own lack of interest as the key in enabling him to avoid such biases; "I was not interested, so I was able to watch. It didn't interest me, so I was able to learn."[5] This position recalls that of such major figures in contemporary Candomblé as Mãe Stella:

> Our religion is so powerful and mysterious that it sparks the curiosity of those from the outside. They think that whirlwinds of curious questions, sometimes quite impertinent, are synonymous with wisdom. Such paths are dangerous, and lead to dismal results

---

[1] Turiba (1990:79). Verger often expressed this theme: "I did not come to Africa as someone doing a study; I came as someone belonging to that world" (Interview with Gautrand 1993:30) ; and "I do not define myself as a student of the people of Bahia, I am a friend of the people of Bahia" (Interview with Gottschal and Guerreiro 1994:40).

[2] Interview with Azoulay (1993:19).

[3] Personal communication.

[4] Interview with Azoulay (1993:19).

[5] Interview with Souty (1998:233).

> and veritable labyrinths. One piece of advice to the visitors and friends of [Candomblé]; *don't ask, observe*![1]

Verger often contrasted his own methodology with that of others; "I never did research following so-called 'scientific' methods, I was more of a participant."[2] The "'scientific' method" was in his view exemplified by the asking of questions, which presents two potential dangers. In the first case, it simply alienates the subjects: "He who wishes to discover something and starts asking questions makes people close up."[3] In the second case, the reverse occurs, and the fieldworker actually elicits a sympathetic reaction from the subject. Yet this too results in a distortion of the data:

> … in fieldwork research a disagreeable situation is generally established between the researcher and the person interviewed. The latter quickly picks up the intentions and thinking of the researcher and, full of good will, gives answers that fit the desired research hypothesis. Even if the informant does not willfully deform the facts, he at least attempts to explain himself in terms that will be comprehensible to his interlocutor, the result being the great satisfaction of the latter and a great injustice to the truth (1982a:8).

Guided by a predetermined problem and theoretical orientation, the researcher comes to the field with anything but a neutral attitude. His biases are further exacerbated by inevitable institutional restrictions:

> The disaster in so-called "scientific" research is that you are obliged in a limited time to come back with information. You are thus obliged to ask questions, which automatically cuts you off from all truth. People realize immediately what's in your head, what your working hypothesis is, and they reassure you in that hypothesis for the simple reason that you are only interested in things that confirm it. And so you return and write-up something that has already been

---

[1] Azevedo Santos (1995:88-9) [Italics added]. For another expression of this ides, see Earl Castillo (2000).

[2] Interview with Gautrand (1993:30) "I was in a position of friendship with them, which is not always the case with European anthropologists, who usually come to ask questions and take down information" (Interview with Garrigues 1992:174).

[3] Interview with Mereiles (1996:100).

> decided in advance, which does not make for very interesting science.[1]

Verger thus saw the interview process as producing inherent biases and distortions due to its very nature as a form of human interaction. Coming to the field with limited time and funding, as well as a specific objective (such as seeking material for a book or answers to some theoretical debate), the researcher is anything but a disinterested observer. Verger's oft-repeated comparison of the ethnographer hungry for information to an overzealous suitor – "When a man chases a woman, she runs, and when the man is not interested, all the women run after him"[2]– suggests the absurdity of such claims to objectivity.

According to Verger, his own informants "perceived that I was not approaching them with a notebook and a pen to study them, like other Western researchers, who start with a working hypothesis and only consider that which confirms it."[3] In this way, he "ended up collecting a good deal of information, which didn't interest me. And precisely because it didn't interest me, people gave me the information."[4] The data he gathered was thus determined less by any research agenda of his own, than by his 'informants' themselves, for he simply "collected what they considered important to communicate."[5]

Verger was thus in a sense a truly disinterested observer, for while the typically 'disinterested' social scientist may in fact be extremely interested in his subjects as sources of data, Verger was interested in his 'subjects' above all as *people*. This may be what Monod was reffering to when he wrote that "Pierre Verger can go far because he knows how to practice the rare virtues of sympathy and detachment" (1992:8), and what Freyre was thinking of when he praised Verger for "knowing how to unite sympathy for the questions he studies and the capacity to consider them with the necessary distance for scientific objectivity" (Lünhing 1999:322).

---

[1] Interview with Gautrand (1993:31).

[2] Interview with Langeira (1987:9)

[3] *A Tribuna* May 31, 1989 (p.6).

[4] Interview with Dias (1995:32).

[5] *A Tribuna* (*op. cit.)*.

A Disease Theory of Explanations

> *Explanations are a disease. To explain things is to kill them. It is better to feel than to explain. Can you explain why you like a particular soup? It tastes good. At the moment you are eating it, you have a sense of satisfaction that cannot be explained. You should not try to explain a thing that has no explanation. You have to feel.*
>
> – Pierre Verger[1]

Verger's dislike of questions may be understood as part of a more general aversion to theory:

> I never did ethnographic research in the true sense; I never asked people questions and wrote down the answers on paper, on what I would have liked to hear them to say. That would have meant that I had a theory to begin with and was doing a study to confirm whether my theory was correct ... which is what ethnologists and anthropologists usually do.[2]

Verger understood informant questioning, working hypotheses and the theoretical frameworks as all part of a single process. The goal of that process is to explain, but its result is often merely to distort observed reality: "When a person works with a hypothesis, he is able to prove absolutely anything,"[3] If the goal of social theory is to seek explanations for social and cultural phenomena, Verger deplored the very attempt at explaining human phenomena: "I have no theory whatsoever," he declared, "I collect information and leave it to others to draw the conclusions."[4]

While dispensing with preconceptions is a basic methodological principle advocated by Weber and Durkheim, abandoning the theoretical framework, research problem and questions so central to social science research is more original. Verger further outlined a critique of the entire system of knowledge production of which problem-driven field research is a part: "It's fairly alarming," he stated at one conference:

---

[1] Interview with Aguilar (1993:6).

[2] Interview with Garrigues (1992:172).

[3] Interview with Fraga (1988:7).

[4] Interview with Larangeira (1987:8).

> but we live in a veritable civilization of parrots. We blindly repeat texts that have been published. If someone writes a piece of junk, it is more or less certain that that piece of junk will be repeated and amplified. And because it was accompanied by references, page numbers, and editors' names, [such a citation looks] very serious and erudite. And it becomes very difficult to refute later ... The guardians of traditional knowledge often speak only their own languages and do not understand French, English or German. And not having access to the fantasies published by certain researchers, they are unable to correct them (1965:227).

By questioning the criteria according to which a researcher's statement becomes accepted as 'scientific' fact, Verger invites an interrogation of the legitimacy of social science itself as a form of knowledge. He cautioned against the dangers of bringing a theoretical framework developed by one society to bear on data drawn from another, contending that theory-driven research: "allows one to do brilliant work in the civilization of the author, which has nothing to do with the reality being researched."[1] He even saw in such activity a potential threat to its objects of study:

> Perhaps the greatest danger for Candomblé comes from those from the outside doing research who try to explain the unexplainable. They invent rationales that are sometimes quite brilliant about what they have understood which have more affinity with what they are intellectually prepared to perceive than with reality.[2]

When at a panel debate,[3] French structuralist Luc de Heusch compared African spirit possession to Western hysteria, Verger responded with palpable irritation:

> Your comparison between those who follow these religions and hysterics or mental patients is most impertinent, for we are talking

---

[1] Interview with Larangeira (1987:8).

[2] Interview with Fraga (1990:8). Verger voiced this thought often, e.g.: "What is really dangerous [for Candomblé] are intellectual theories. Unmentionable things that are presented with great intelligence. Very intelligent things! Yet, one can say very intelligently things that are extremely stupid; very well explained, but utterly false ... the reasoning is perfect, but the basis is false" (1980:7).

[3] At the conference on traditional African religions in Bauké, published in *Les Religions Africaines Traditionnelles* (*Rencontres Internationales de Bouaké*) Paris: Éditions de Seuil (1965).

> about consecrated priests dedicated to a cult ... On your excursion into hysteria I cannot follow. I am not a doctor, I am a pagan (1965:108).

As for de Heusch's *Maître*, known for his highly theoretical orientation, Verger characterized him as the "hopelessly intelligent" Lévi-Strauss (Le Bouler 1994:226).

Verger's critique of the social science knowledge production process can be summarized in the following points: 1) theory-driven research involving limited time and funding forces a researcher to seek certain kinds of information for particular purposes; 2) this situation encourages the asking of questions, which belie the researcher's intentions; 3) faced with this situation, the informant either refuses to provide information or himself participates in the process of deformation by consciously or unconsciously attempting to supply the researcher with the answers that the latter appears to desire; 4) the resulting data are written up, published and quoted by others, without their validity necessarily being checked by those from whom they have originally been gathered. The results of a dubious research process thus acquire legitimacy as a reference and in turn influence subsequent research.

Verger's distrust of theory led him to believe that "it is better to describe what one observes as faithfully as possible without taking the risk of interpreting what is implicit,"[1] This resulted in a style of data presentation distinguished by a heavy reliance on direct quotes with little or no commentary from the author. "His scientific writings," writes Lühning, "gave voice to the historical sources, to the informants and to life experience, avoiding theories in preference of the facts of life placed in their historical context" (1999:352). This striving for "careful interpretation that takes into account the context in which the sources were written without attempting to apply preconceived theories" (*Ibid*., 342) gave Verger's works a collage-like quality that some have associated with his photographic sensibility. "Pierre Verger the researcher is a photographer when he writes," states Cida Nobrega: "He emits no opinion and uses no unnecessary words, but simply describes in detail what he observes."[2] Reis suggests that even this method could not completely escape some form of interpretation:

---

[1] Interview with Falcon (1990:8).

[2] *A Tarde* Caderno Dec.18, 1989 (p.5). Fundação Pierre Verger archive.

> Verger decided to let the documents speak, transcribing them copiously ... an expression of the author's photographism … as if he understood the construction of his narrative as a collage of documental 'snapshots' which insured the fidelity and impartiality of the historian. Yet it is clear that, just as there is a choice of focus, angle and light in photography (beyond the choice of photos to be exhibited), so there is a choice of documents and the order in which they will appear in a book – and both operations imply an interpretation of reality (1996:6).

Although the value of this "photographic" method is debated, a researcher as theoretically inclined as Bastide once declared, "I prefer the long lists of *oríkí* (spoken, sung or drummed sayings) collected by Verger, with all their ambiguity, to myths more or less reworked to achieve a misleading transparency" (1960:121).

In spite of himself, Verger often complained of being gradually drawn into analyzing and even theorizing by the very act of writing (Souty 1998). Over the years, he generated a number of highly original historical hypotheses and other ideas that could certainly be termed 'theoretical'. A few brief examples are: 1) the notion of Yoruba religion as not polytheism, but as a series of "*monothéismes multiple juxtaposés;*"[1] 2) the idea of the "*verbe agissant,"* or active verbal component of a herbal remedy central to the process of naming medicinal plants; 3) the thesis that the Yoruba Godhead *Oludumare* was actually a result of Muslim or Christian influence, replacing the original principle of *asé* or vital force as High God; 4) the idea of trance in Yoruba religion as not "possession" but the expression of an individual's latent or repressed unconscious, or "true" personality.[2]

In sum, while one does find ideas, reflections and at least suggestions of theoretical perspectives in Verger's work, he neither attempted nor intended the kind of sweeping systematization of his colleague Bastide. His guiding

---

[1] "Overlapping mulotiple monotheisms"; an idea later developed by Karen Barber (1981).

[2] These views on the individual human psyche are highly reminiscent of theory of Jung's theory of the "Self," although Verger's knowledge of Jung's work seems to have been limited. He further discussed the orisha as "archetypes" in a more or less Jungian sense. See Lünhing (1999; 2000) for a discussion of Verger's vision of the innate and the learned.

philosophy ever remained: "To explain things is only to limit their greatness; everything is greater than the explanation."[1]

Conclusions

> *Ethnologist or Anthropologist, what awful words! You don't study people; they're not minerals or insects. I am fascinated by people because I love them. I meet them not to study, but to learn.*
>
> – Pierre Verger[2]

While one can draw no neat and simple conclusions from the life, work and thought of Pierre Fátúmbí Verger, it is nevertheless possible to note several issues that his example does raise for the social sciences. It illustrates how intimately intertwined are the personal and professional lives of any field researcher. It speaks elequently for the decisive importance of the relationship between researcher and 'subject' to the process of ethnographic knowledge production, reminding us that this is first and foremost a *human* relationship. Finally, it offers an answer to the epistemelogical dilemma of studying one system of knowledge from the vantage-point of another; suggesting that in order to adequately represent a cultural system, one must first gain legitimacy within that system. While these themes have become commonplace in recent social science writing, Verger confronted them over fifty years ago; not through theoretical reflection, but through *praxis*.

By eschewing the objectification of human beings and their cultures, by refusing to reduce one system of knowledge and experience to the terms of another, and by acknowledging the subjects of his work as the ultimate arbiters of its validity, in the collection, analysis and presentation of his data, Verger demonstrated a unique vision of social science as *human* science. Thus Pivin observes that in Verger's work: "It is always the human being who speaks, never the specialist," Lühning concludes that "Verger's work was simply human, as much in its origin as in its application, its essence and its language" (1999:353), and Verger himself remarked: "You could call it ethnography, but you could also call it human interest."[3]

---

[1] Quoted in Staal (1992:1).

[2] Interview with Roegiers (1989).

[3] Interview with Garrigues (1992:72).

As social science, Verger's work was curiously inverted. His principle interest was not in the data he collected, but in the people with whom he worked, and the academia may well have been for him merely a means of "converting to paganism." His field relationships were not the short-term, interest-based affairs encouraged by the funding and time limits of the Western academy; for it was those very relationships that inspired his research and writing in the first place.

To return to the question of why Verger has not received the recognition in the social sciences that he appears to deserve, one can only speculate. Perhaps it is ultimately not surprising that this man who earned titles of distinction in two systems and yet so unambiguously chose one over the other would earn more respect in the system he chose than that which he rejected. Verger not only obtained data which such specialists as Bastide could not, but he refused to divulge that data, and then claimed that it did not interest him. While others struggle for years to earn their doctorates, Verger gained his without ever taking class, and then routinely made such declarations as: "People are not informed by education; they are deformed by education," and:

> I have neither respect nor attraction for intellectuals. That perpetual need to justify oneself, to explain, to criticize others and to criticize themselves in their critiques. [These] people have real trouble getting out of their own heads.[1]

One can sense in the few academics who knew Verger well a peculiar mixture of admiration and envy. One of the qualities that evoked such ambivalence was Verger's uncompromising individuality. Monod wrote almost wistfully: "He is available and free, perhaps the only truly free man I know" (1995:8), and Freyre praised his: "condition, so rare in professional ethnologists or anthropologists: that of being Pierre Verger a free man" (Lühning 1999:322n.13), Bastide confessed "I envy you, believe me, imprisoned by my students and far from the dearest object of my studies" (Morin 1994:40), and Métraux confided:

> My recent problems have made me think of your wisdom. Of our entire generation, are you not the only one who has achieved what the Americans call 'adjustment' I suspect you of being fairly happy, which stirs my jealous (Le Bouler 1994:247-8)

---

[1] Interview with Souty (1998:229).

This respect sometimes verged on awe. In spite of Monod's legendary frustration with Verger's "esoteric scruples," he once wrote that "Pierre Verger does not say all or show all, for he is also a sage" (1992:8). Similarly, Métraux told Verger towards the end of his life: "More than ever, I believe that it is you who are right. The true sage, the model we all should have followed, is Pierre Verger, the master of us all" (Le Bouler 1994:252). Jorge Amado, whose book *Jubiabá*, about a Bahian sorcerer, provided the initial inspiration for Verger's visit Bahia, recalled: "Mãe Senhora often told [my wife] with a friendly smile: 'Be careful with Verger, he's a sorcerer, he has powers'." Yes he does have powers; he knows things!" (1997:7). Whether sage or sorcerer, Verger himself certainly denied being a sociologist. "I am neither an ethnologist nor a sociologist," he concluded: "but simply a well-intentioned man with a sentimental interest in a particular form of religion that I encountered in Brazil among the descendants of Africans (1965:97).

Perhaps this Doctor of the Sorbonne, Director of Research of the CNRS, Father of the Secret (*babaláwo*) of Ketu and the Eyes of Shango (*Ojú Obá*) of Bahia only proves once again the old addage, *nul n'est prophète en son pays*.[1]

Works Cited

AGUILAR, Josélia (1993) : "Entrevista : Pierre Verger, um francês apaixonado pela Bahia", *A Revista do Economico,* n° 472, p. 4-6.

AKINJOGBIN, I. A. (1976) : "Introduction", (in) *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia*. Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, p. XXV-XXVI.

AMADO, Jorge (1995) : "Préface", (in) *Ewé : le verbe et le pouvoir des plantes chez les Yorùbá*. Paris, éd. Maisonneuve et Larose.

AUGRAS, Monique (1992) : *Le double et la métamorphose*, Paris, éd. Méridiens Klincksieck) [1983].

AZOULAY, Eliane (1993) : "Le babalao de Bahia", *Télérama,* n° 290, p. 14-9 (déc).

BARBER, Karin (1981) : "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes towards the Orisa", *Africa,* 51 (3), p. 724-45.

[1] "No-one is a prophet in his own land."

BASTIDE, Roger (1992) : “Préface”, (in) *Dieux d'Afrique*, Paris, éd. Revue Noire (2 e éd.), p. 9-12 [1954].

Idem, (1978) : *African Religions of Brazil*, trad. H. Sebba. Baltimore. Johns Hopkins University Press [1960].

Idem, (1960) : “À propos de quelques livres récents sur les Afro-Américains”, *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines,* Paris, n° 4, p. 121.

Idem, (1958) : *Le Candomblé de Bahia (rite nagô),* Paris, éd. Mouton.

DIAS, Lucy (1995) : “Pierre Verger : uma vida de contramão”, *Marie Claire*, Paris, n° 55, p. 28-34 (aug).

DIBIE, Pascal and GUICHENEY, Pierre (1997) : “Pierre Verger”, *Géo,* n° 224, p. 119-32 (oct).

FALCON, Gustavo (1990) : “Pierre Fatumbi Verger”, *Revista da Bahia* (encarte especial), n° 33, p. 1-20. Salvador, Empresa Gráfica da Bahia (sep/nov).

FRAGA, Myriam (1988) : “Entrevista : Pierre Verger”, *Exú,* n° 5, p. 3-7 (sep/nov).

GARRIGUES, Emmanuel (1991) : “Entretien avec Emmanuel Garrigues, Pierre Verger”, *L'Ethnographie, numéro spéciale, ethnographie et photographie,* 88 (1), p. 145-78.

GAUTRAND, J. C. (1993), : “Pierre Verger le Messager”, *Le Photographe,* n° 1510, p. 25-31.

GOTTSCHALL, Carlota and GUERREIRO, Ana Maria (1994) : “O Olhar Negro de Pierre Verger”, *Bahia Analise e Dados,* 3 (4), p. 39-41 (mar).

GUARIGLIA, Ana Maria (1996) : “O filho do trovão”, *A Folha de São Paulo,* feb. n° 18, p. 5-6.

GURAN, Milton (1998) : “Notas de pesquisa sobre a iniciação e o trabalho fotográfico de Pierre Fatumbi Verger no Benin”, *Cadernos de Antropologia e Imagem,* 7 (2), p. 105-13 (aug).

LARANGEIRA, Isabel (1987) : “Escravos pelo Olhar de Verger”, *Journal da Bahia,* Jul. n° 7, p. 8-9.

Le BOULER, Jean-Pierre (1993) : *Le Pied à l'étrier : corréspondances entre Alfred Métraux et Pierre Verger (1946-1963)*, Paris, éd. Jean-Michel Place.

LÜHNING, Angela (1999) : "Pierre Fatumbi Verger e sua Obra", *Afro-Asia,* n° 21-2, p. 315-64.

MARIANO, Agnes Francine (1996) : *Antropologia Radical : ou a etnografia fotográfica de Pierre Verger sobre a cultura negra na Bahia*, Salvodor, UFBA.

MEIRELES, Clarisse (1996) : "Aventura…", *Raça Brazil,* n° 98-100 (sep).

METRAUX, Alfred (1978) : *Itinéraires I (1935-53)*, Paris, éd. Payot.

MONOD, Théodore (1995) : "Préface" (in) *Dieux d'Afrique*, Paris, éd. Revue Noire (2 e éd.), p.7-8 [1954].

MORIN, Françoise (1994) : "Les inédits et la corréspondance de Roger Bastide", (in) *Roger Bastide ou le réjouissement de l'abîme*, Philippe TORRA, Paris, éd. L'Harmattan, p. 40-2.

ONOFRE, José (1993) : "Perfil : mais un herói desconhecido", *Istoé*, n° 1240 (7), p. 68-70.

PIC, Raphael (1995) : "Pierre Verger des Dieux", *Muséart,* n° 55, p. 46-47.

PIVIN, Jean-Loup (1993) : "Préface", (in) *Pierre Verger ; le Messager, the Go-Between, Photographies 1962-62*, Paris, éd. Révue Noire, p.5-6.

REIS, João José (1996) : "Pierre Verger Historiador", *A Folha de São Paulo*, Feb. n° 18, p. 6.

ROEGIERS, Patrique (1989) : "Deux expositions de Pierre Verger : un ethnologue sauvage", newspaper clipping from archives of the Fundação Pierre Verger.

SANTOS, Maria Stella de Azedevo (1995) : *Meu tempo é agora*, Projeto CENTRHU, Curitiba.

SOUTY, Jérôme (1998) : "Comme un seul homme : Pierre Fátúmbí Verger", *L'homme*, Paris, n° 147, p. 221-36.

STAAL, Parvati Jeannette (1992) : "Women, Food, Sex and Survival in Candomblé : an interpretative analysis of an African-Brazilian religion in Bahia, Brazil", Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA.

TURIBA, Luis (1990) : "Coco be lefó axé Verger", *Bric a Brac*, n° 4, p. 78-82.

TURNER, Victor W. (1974) : *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors : symbolic action in human society*, Ithica and London, Cornell University Press.

VERGER, Pierre Fátúmbí (1957 (*Notes sur le culte des Orisha et Vodoun à Bahia la Baie de Tous les Saints au Brésil et à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves.* Dakar: IFAN 54.

Idem, (1964) : "The Yoruba High God, a review of sources", Odu, n° 2, p. 19-40.

Idem, (1965) : "Les religion traditionnelles africaines sont-elles compatibles avec les formes actuels de l'éxistence ?" (in) *Les Religions Africaines Traditionnelles* (*Rencontres Internationales de Bouaké*), Paris, éd. du Seuil, p. 97-118.

Idem, (1968) : *Flux et reflux de la traite des esclaves entre le Golfe du Bénin et Bahia de Todos os Santos, du dix-septième au dix-neuvième siècle*, Paris, éd. Mouton.

Idem, (1976) : *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia, 17th - 19th centuries*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press [1968].

Idem, (1980) : *Retratos da* Bahia, Salvador, Corrupio.

Idem, (1982a) : "Etnografia religiosa iorubá e probidade scientifica", *Religião e Sociedade*, n° 8, p. 3-10.

Idem, (1982b) : *50 anos de fotografia*, Salvador, Corrupio.

Idem, (1986) : "Transe de possession religieuse chez les yoruba et les fons du Nigeria et de la République de Bénin et chez leurs déscendants au Nouveau-Monde", (in) *Transe, Chamanisme, Possession: actes des deuxièmes rencontres internationales sur la fête et la communication*, Nice, éd. Serre, p. 219-43.

Idem, (1989) : "Pierre Verger volta a Paris, sua cidade natal", *A Tribuna da Bahia* May 31 (Cultura), p. 6.

Idem, (1992) : "Trente ans d'amitié avec Alfred Métraux, mon presque jumeau", *Présence d'Alfred Métraux*, Paris, p. 173-91.

Idem, (1993a) : "As mûltiples actividades de Roger Bastide na África", *Revista da* USP, n° 18, p. 121-5.

Idem, (1993b) : *Le Messager, the Go-Between, Photographies 1932-1962*, Paris, éd. Révue Noire.

Idem, (1995a) : *Dieux d'Afrique*, Paris, éd. Paul Hartman (2 e éd.), [1954].

Idem, (1995b) : “Algumas datas na vida de Pierre Verger”, *Alternidades*, n° 2, p. 105-24.

Idem, (1997) : *Ewé : le verbe et le pouvoir des plantes chez les Yorùbá*, Paris, éd. Maisonneuve et Larose.