Special Issue on Jane Guyer's *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*

When People Cross Thresholds

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Abstract This paper makes a very preliminary and provisional attempt to relate the discussion in Jane Guyer's *Marginal Gains* (2004) of disjunction, thresholds, and multiple scales of value characteristic of economies in the Atlantic zone with the disjunction, profusion, and fragmentation characteristic of artistic genres of the region, especially praise poetry. It suggests that their underlying common property is an intense focus on the making and unmaking of persons. In a region where social and political self-realization is open-ended and depends upon acquiring people, and where people are transactable, transitions between multiple conditions of personhood can take place, but some thresholds cannot be crossed. One of the key ethnographic examples in *Marginal Gains*—the Niger Delta—is revisited to suggest possible lines of further inquiry into this aspect of the originality of cultural production in the zone of the Atlantic trade.

The Originality of the Interface

Jane Guyer's *Marginal Gains* (2004) is a book that stimulates fresh thinking about cultural history in West and central Africa. To start with, there is the overarching conception of the productivity of the interface. *Marginal Gains*

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shows that African economies are, and have long been, workable systems that *originated* at the interface of local and European commerce. They cannot be simply extrapolated from existing cultural principles or dismissed as ad hoc responses to circumstances; and they cannot be described as the articulation of two preexisting sets of relations, capitalist and noncapitalist. Even ideas and institutions often thought of as quintessentially African, such as "fetishes" and religions of affliction, were innovations forged in the context of five hundred years of Atlantic trade.

"Neither autonomous nor subjugated," societies within range of the Atlantic trade also spawned idiosyncratic artistic genres, formed in the matrix of a long-standing commercial interaction, and not merely the outcome of culture contact or mixing. Such forms commonly are characterized as "hybrid" or "creolized," and this may be useful as a preliminary move. But these terms do not help us grasp their dynamics and historicity. They tend to encourage the idea that the forms so described are a kind of compound, produced by mixing elements from two discrete sources. The resulting analysis has often stopped at identifying the "indigenous" and "imported" elements in order to demonstrate simply that these forms are, indeed, hybrid. The positive vocabulary of "appropriation" and "recasting" of foreign elements notwithstanding, the basic model is still a bit like the old Cadbury's advertisement showing a stream of milk and a stream of molten dark chocolate pouring from either side into the familiar purple wrapper and mingling to make milk chocolate. *Marginal Gains*, by contrast, rejects conceptual binarism in favor of nonreductive multiplicity; it pitches its tent on the productive, plural space of European-African commercial interaction. This enables us to focus on the exogeneity of the indigenous and the endogeneity of the imported. Or to put it differently, it helps us get away from explaining these cultural forms as the outcome of mixing ready-made ingredients, and leads us to look instead at the modes and manners of their generation, in highly specific historical and cultural circumstances.

Jane Guyer is unusual among economic anthropologists in paying a great deal of attention to art forms, expressive genres, and local conceptual worlds. One of the most inspiring things, for me, about her work is the way she has always drawn on studies of performance and orature, because this means that her interpretation of economic systems can in turn stimulate further interpretation of cultural forms. There are indeed striking analogies between the social-economic systems she describes—both in *Marginal Gains* and in previous work—and West African music, epic, and praise poetry. She argues that difference and disjuncture, the proliferation of scales of value and methods of reckoning, are not a mere by-product of tribal compartmentalization, a leftover residue of precommercial economies. Rather, they are something that African merchants deliberately fostered and maintained, because it is in crossing the thresholds between discontinuous scales, and in manipulating alternative, multiple modes of evaluation, that gain lies. This view puts performance center stage, for the discontinuous sequences are

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pegged to each other performatively, as components in a repertoire, rather than cohering as a unified cognitive map. This view also raises questions about history. When we recognize that alternatives are often kept in reserve rather than being superseded, and new things added onto and run alongside older things rather than displacing them, the problem of how to describe cultural and ideational change becomes immensely more complicated and challenging. The past is never really past.

In West African art forms, the value placed on proliferation, multiplicity, disjuncture, and asymmetry has been noted again and again. One thinks of the segmentation and asymmetry of the patterns in Gelede masquerade costumes (Drewal & Drewal 1983); the polyrhythmic mode of much West African drum music, in which each instrument doggedly follows its own beat until—at long intervals—all temporarily converge (Chernoff 1979), just as differently based reckoning systems may do; the piecing together, in the performance of the Woi epic of the Kpelle of Liberia, of enigmatic fragments, in a way that highlights both the diversity of skills required from different segments of the audience and the impossibility of closure (Stone 1988).

At several levels, and in several ways, these resonances go beyond analogy. This is not only because West African expressive and artistic products were often themselves objects of exchange and sources of gain. (Lisa McNee [2000:33], for example, has argued that the Wolof praise poetry of Senegalese women is as much a "commodity" as material goods are; praises are exchanged, offered, and repaid, and to receive them is to incur debt.) It is also because so many artistic and expressive forms are about the constitution and evaluation of persons, and about the forging, consolidation, and realignment of the relations of persons to one another and to the world of spiritual beings. This is at the same time the ideational heart of Atlantic commerce, because the acquisition and sale of people lay at the center of a vast constellation of other transactions involving the conversion of money and goods into people and vice versa, and the conversion of people into sacrifices, adoptees, pawns, surrogates, substitutes, equivalents, and extensions of personal agency. Commercial and social achievement depended on successfully manipulating these conversions (see Guyer & Eno Belinga 1995).

Revisiting some of my own work on praise poetry in the light of *Marginal Gains* suggests to me the following—very, very sketchy and provisional—line of thought: (1) that it may have been in commercial cultures most influenced by the Atlantic trade that social mobility and ideas of self-aggrandizement or self-making were most pronounced in Africa; (2) that self-making took place through the recruitment of a diversity of people (as clients, wives, affines, fictional kin, servants, bondsmen, slaves, and hangers-on) and through the acknowledgment that their adherence afforded; (3) that the competitive display and consolidation of reputation through art forms such as praise poetry was a crucial element in the process by

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which such positions were established, maintained, and advertised; (4) that praise poetry assembled reputations in a disjunctive, plural, heterogeneous mode—and that this was most marked in the praise poetry of the regions most integrated into or affected by the Atlantic trade; (5) that this disjunctiveness must be understood in the context of a general cultural tendency to multiplication, proliferation, and fomentation of both singularity and diversity in the region (Guyer 1993; Guyer & Eno Belinga 1995)—where people are "composed" of a range of skills and attributes, leaders' followings are "composed" of a diversity of talents, magical figures are "composed" of a multiplicity of potent elements (MacGaffey 2000), and trade goods are preferred in assorted lots rather than consignments made up of a single type of item; but that (6) there might in addition be a more specific way of understanding the dazzling lability of West and central African praise genres, in terms of the prevalence and diversity of transactions in people. That is to say that the self-aggrandizement hailed by praise poets had at its center the acquisition, conversion, and disposal of persons, and the Atlantic trade heightened, speeded up, and multiplied the opportunities and modes by which persons could be converted from one condition to another. One man's rise meant another's fall—self-aggrandizement was at others' expense—and "big men" were always rising, so that social statuses were peculiarly and relationally unstable. Hence, perhaps, the intense, vocative, piling-together of a diversity of praise epithets—drawn from multiple sources, couched in multiple voices—to consolidate the big man's name. And finally (7), conversely, it could be suggested that disjunction and incommensurability in commercial scales of value had, as their central instance, the convertibility and nonconvertibility of persons. For if this was an economy of thresholds, as Guyer brilliantly and thought-provokingly suggests in *Marginal Gains*, then the most salient and problematic, paradoxical, and never-fully-overcome thresholds were the ones that people crossed or did not cross when they moved back and forth through the manifold steps and stages between being agents powered by individual initiative and being the objects or extensions of others' agency.

This is a possible argument, but I don't know if it really holds together. It would require a lot more work, both on artistic genres and on transactions involving human assets, to find out. That would be an interesting project. But at this stage, all I can do is play with a few preliminary and exploratory ideas, inspired by *Marginal Gains* and drawing partly on works that *Marginal Gains* led me to, including Amaury Talbot's *Tribes of the Niger Delta* (1967 [1932]).

Praise Poetry and Self-Making

Praise genres across Africa share to varying degrees an aesthetic of fluidity and disjunctiveness. All are vocative, often taking the form of nominalized

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appellations ("Oh you, one-who-rises-at-dawn-to-eat-the-heads-of-fish"), rather than being structured as a unified description or as a linear narrative. This means that they are made up of quasi-autonomous, namelike chunks that can be reordered because the links between them are not fixed. There are great variations, however, from one localized genre to another in the way the elements are hooked together and the nature of the performer's address to the subject. The limited comparisons that I have so far been able to make (Barber 1999a, 2007) suggest that these differences in form can be related to different modes of sociality, different ways of conceptualizing social relations and social achievement or fulfillment. *Marginal Gains* inspires the wish to push this further. It does seem likely that those traditions that lie in the Atlantic trade zone, or feel its repercussions most acutely, constitute persons most disjunctively, fragmentedly, and profusely.

The startling gaps and discontinuities of West and central African praise poetry genres suggest ways of making reputation that are more like assembling heterogeneous elements from an open-ended repertoire than painting rounded, bounded portraits.

To start with an example from my own research in western Nigeria: Yoruba praises are held to encapsulate what is distinctive and singular about their subjects. But at the same time, profusion is highly valued, for the more numerous the *oriki* that are heaped upon a person's head, the more expansive his reputation. This leads performers to gather elements from diverse sources, incorporating quotations not only from the personal oriki of other people, but also from other genres such as Ifa verses, proverbs, riddles, and long *aro* chain-poems (Barber 1991). Performers inflect these borrowed textual elements with consummate skill toward the name of their current praisee, but also always retain the prestige of the captured texts' otherness. Thus the reputation of the unique, memorable, distinctive subject is composed of a tissue of quotations (Barber 1999b). An oriki performance thrives on the aesthetics of contrast, and disjunctions are deliberately heightened. Multiplication of alternative epithets is deliberately fostered, and a single subject is saluted with a bewildering array of given names, "names brought from heaven," nicknames, oriki-names, patronymics, teknonyms, and other nominalized forms, sometimes extending into long passages of poetry. Every oriki text teems with the names of other people, captured into a concentrated address that enhances the aura of the praisee. Textual meaning is not considered to be inherent. Oriki are composed of autonomous elements, each of which may lead out from the text-in-performance into hinterlands of other genres. Interpreting such a text involves traveling like a trader, following pathways through proverbs, historical narratives, personal anecdote, etymology, and etiology, in order to return enriched.

Yoruba precolonial polities were hierarchical, with highly elaborated chiefly and royal structures, but the driving dynamic was the competitive self-aggrandizement of individuals. Oriki make people, by representing in

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concentrated form the gaze of recognition by adherents, the ultimate basis of big men's power in an achievement-oriented society. The praise-singer herself enacts this gaze, locking eyes with her addressee and repeatedly calling upon him to pay attention, to respond. The reciprocal relationship of patron and client is apparent, for the praisee, swelling with gratification, may dig deep into his pockets to reward the singer.

In the case of the cattle-owning Ila people of southwestern Zambia, praise poetry was similarly heterogeneous and disjunctive, but here it enacted self-making in a more direct and literal sense than Yoruba oriki. Their nineteenth-century history was "a ghastly story of war and rapine" (Smith & Dale 1920:22) on the fringes of the Atlantic trade. Overrun by Makololo invaders and then by the Barotse, they were subjected to constant slave raiding and were often at war with their neighbors. People were at a premium, and acquisition of people through capture or purchase was a key element in the rise of *mucende*—"bulls" or formidable big men who built up a position and a following for themselves through a combination of luck, personality, and astute management of resources and relationships. This involved engaging in a whirlpool of transactions in which, as Fielder has shown, almost anything could be exchanged for anything else. Individuals converted crops, small livestock, money, slaves, and junior kinspeople into each other, with the ultimate aim of acquiring more cattle. Each person's gain was someone else's loss. Individuals exploited strict rules of avoidance to catch transgressors out in order to fine them; collusive husbands and wives could entrap others in a web of adultery fines (Fielder 1979). By these means and by shrewd trading, women as well as men could build up a position for themselves. Their praise poetry was autonomous and self-directed: rather than enacting a patron-client relationship, Ila men and women praised themselves—no one praised another. But the texts were pieced together from a plethora of hints, observations, and allusions put into the mouths of other people:

> All this wealth "made me conceited," it "made me like a black mamba"; Shamalambwa sympathised with me, saying: "Can this person do the work of womanhood, Munzo, can you manage women's work?" (Rennie 1984; my quotation marks)

In this fragment of an *impango* poem, a successful woman boasts that her wealth is so great that others accuse her of becoming vainglorious and dangerous, and she quotes a comment to the effect that she can no longer fit into a woman's traditional role. She does not deny the accusation—the very voicing of which is testimony to her success—but goes on to quote other alleged opinions about her achievements and social standing. The entire text, expounded in detail by Rennie, is a shifting concatenation of voices and speaking positions, quotations within quotations, all assembled to add pieces to the construction of the performer's persona. The performer com-

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poses from heterogeneous elements an image of an intensely active, dynamic individual self who takes responsibility for her own achievements, staging not only her claims to fame but also her admirers' and detractors' evaluations of these.

The praises of African peoples farther from the Atlantic slave trade zone—Dinka, Zulu, Tswana, Xhosa, Sotho—tend to be composed of longer, more regular, and more stable passages evoking events recent and remote, often through extended narrative passages captured within the vocative mode. Dinka cattle praises unroll in skeins of analogy and metonym, departing further and further from the focal subject; but they do not foreground disjunction and contrast, nor play with continual switches of speaking position in the way Yoruba oriki and Ila impango do (Barber 2007). The form of Sotho praise poetry is analyzed by Kunene into regular stanzas, something that would be impossible in Yoruba or Ila praises (Kunene 1971). Official genres of southern African praise poetry are addressed by bards to chiefs and dignitaries. While dextrously pinpointing significant historical changes, Vail and White (1991) also demonstrate that such texts were relatively stable over long periods. Private, unofficial, popular praises, including self-praises, exist in Zulu culture (Gunner & Gwala 1991; Gunner 1979) but the most highly visible, prestigious, and elaborated texts were more homogeneous and less disjunctive than Yoruba and Ila genres.

This might suggest that the most intense projects of making and self-making in praise poetry, through the assemblage of heterogeneous fragments, may arise in the zone where personhood is most in question, most labile, and most subject to differential evaluation.

Self-Making and -Unmaking in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta, one of *Marginal Gains*'s key ethnographic references, was in the very eye of the Atlantic trade and was organized to play middleman between European merchants and inland producers. It was also a classic and outstanding case of social organization geared toward individual achievement through the recruitment of people, with opportunities for extreme and rapid social mobility. These circumstances seem to have produced a huge spectrum of possible transactions in people and transitions between statuses. The discussion of thresholds in *Marginal Gains* suggests working questions about the nature of these human transitions, their scope and sticking-points, and the degree to which they might be thought to set the tone for the wider Atlantic economy of plural, partly discontinuous scales of value and spheres of exchange.

The Ijo communities of Nembe, New Calabar, Bonny, and Okrika, along with the Efik communities of Old Calabar, recast their older forms of lineage organization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into a sys-

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tem of "canoe houses"—units capable of operating an eighty-man ship for purposes of trade and warfare. Canoe houses were built up by individual leaders through vigorous recruitment, which included large-scale incorporation of slaves. Wealth and power depended very directly on the acquisition of people. But people, including those acquired by capture and purchase, in turn had unprecedented scope to improve their situation through energetic and skillful trading and fighting. According to G. I. Jones (1963:57), the majority of the new canoe houses founded from the late eighteenth century onward were headed by former slaves. Servile origins were erased when slaves became chiefs: there was even a standardized punishment, in the form of scurrilous songs sung for three days against the transgressor, for daring to refer to those origins (Talbot 1967:293). The newly acquired slave's vulnerability was at the same time his or her opportunity:

> It is noticeable, when one examines European accounts of brutal and arbitrary cruelty executed by chiefs upon their house members, that the victims are normally persons in this category of slave. This defencelessness however was only one side of the medal. Because he was so dependent upon his master and devoid of relatives and pseudo-relatives who could make competing claims upon his services and wealth, a slave's interests could coincide more closely with those of his master than could those of other members of the master's household. For this reason a slave able to advance his master's interest might find himself the recipient of his master's favours and find his rise to wealth and power facilitated by this initial position of complete dependence. (Jones 1963:169)

Lack of kin was therefore a fast-track route to acquiring "people"—by amassing assets, initially under the direction of a house chief and later, if all went well, as the founder of a new house of one's own.

But people could fall as dramatically as they could rise. Wealthy men could get into such serious debt that their only way out was to enslave themselves to their creditor. Adultery, for example, could be crushingly expensive: according to one of Talbot's informants, "all the town would support the wronged man in an adultery case, so that the adulterer had to pay heavy fine, or sell himself" (Talbot 1967:200). Once he had sold himself, such a person was vulnerable to being sold on, or sacrificed, by his new master when funds or propitiation were called for. People, just like gods, could be unmade as well as made (Horton 1962, 1970; Barber 1981). They could rise to great positions from abject servitude; and they could plummet from wealth and high status into extreme dependence and vulnerability.

This mobile, achievement-oriented culture emphasized invention, creativity, and innovation, reflected in the centrality of the cult of water spirits, who were credited with responsibility for personal initiative and individualistic deviation from social norms (Horton 1962:201; 1970:194). But

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it's interesting to contemplate the way in which an individual endowed with such initiative, picking his way through the quicksands of cutthroat competition, could end up instigating a transaction by which he surrendered his capacity for initiative and became an extension of or substitute for someone else. Talbot (1967:293–24) emphasizes the element of choice and initiative in self-enslavement: "A free man [among the Kalabari] could never be enslaved against his will. Only by pledging himself for debt, or putting himself under the protection of a chief in order to escape some deserved penalty, could he lose his freedom." So when he "pledged himself for debt," he gave up the very free will that he had exercised to initiate that transaction. Thus the debtor literally converts himself into payment for his own debt.

Such conversions have their place in the much wider spectrum of transformations from singularity to generality and back, from usable object to instrument of currency and back, as highlighted in *Marginal Gains.* Manillas leave Britain as goods and arrive in Africa as currency; some of them may then be withdrawn from circulation and converted back into specific, usable objects when they are worn as bangles in a display of wealth. Similarly a specific type of gun, superseded by newer models in France and converted into scrap metal, was then converted into an item of barter for the Congolese trade; the Congo traders treated it as a general-purpose currency, but they might also on occasion convert it back into "singularity, as a named component of a bridewealth payment" (Guyer 2004:44). It is when persons are *un*made—undone—that conversion from one kind of value to another is most apparent, and the thresholds become most visible.

Talbot (1967:281) depicts a world of shifting equivalencies and non-equivalencies between human beings which I can barely touch upon here: "The severity of market rules shows the importance in which these institutions were held. Quarrel or fight entailed a heavy fine, while, should a man chance to be killed as the result of a dispute, the slayer was hanged in the middle of the market-place, usually from the branches of a tree set apart for this purpose. Should a trader refuse to accept a particular kind of manilla agreed upon as local currency, he was sacrificed to the market juju, unless able to provide a substitute." This certainly shows the lengths to which trading communities went to fix and maintain standards and currencies (see Dike 1956:42–43; Guyer 2004:70). But another thing it reveals is how people could be transferred and converted; how one person's life could stand in for another's, in particular circumstances. Here the punishment for refusing to accept an agreed currency is conflated with a sacrifice to propitiate the market god, and the victim can be someone other than the transgressor. One might think that the slave or dependant substitutes for the master in symbolic fashion—rather as the Nuer might sacrifice a cucumber to represent an ox if the latter was not available. But the death of the slave is not a representation of a death; it is a real death displaced from the master to the servant—a metonymic rather than metaphorical

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relationship, in which the slave is in some sense an extension of the master, an outlying part of him under his agency. And this is not all there is to it. Though it is difference in power and status that drives the substitution, the logic would seem to be one of equivalence. What the market laws and the market juju require is a human life, not money, a chattel, or an animal. A human life is a human life. A slave's life is a life no less than his master's, and even as the master disposes of him, he must be seen as retaining some kind of equivalence—as being in some sense a potential point upon which self-making could be built, a potential operator and manipulator of persons. Thus the human being does not cross completely into the category of nonagentive victim. Even on the brink of death a slave may be able to convert him- or herself back into a transactor—as in the case of the chief's favorite slave wife, known as "my skin," destined to be sacrificed during her husband/master's funeral unless she had "amassed sufficient wealth to ransom herself by purchasing a victim to offer in her stead" (Talbot 1967:197).

There were thresholds that could not be crossed. Not all lives could be converted into money or stood-in for by an inferior. "No murderer could redeem his life with money," and "the idea of 'a life for a life' is so ingrained among the people of this region that a murderer usually goes straight away and hangs himself without further ado" (Talbot 1967:296). In some situations, a status system characteristic of corporate lineage societies came into play. In these cases, a death had to be balanced by another death of a person of equivalent status. "Should a man fall in a family fight and the chiefs be unable to fix the guilt definitely upon anyone, one of the opponents of equal rank was killed by the dead man's House" (Talbot 1967:295). And thus it could happen that a master had to die for a crime committed by a slave: if a slave killed a free man of another house, the dead man's relatives could demand "not the death of the actual murderer, but a man of equal rank to their lost relative" (Talbot 1967:395–96). G. I. Jones (1963:61) has suggested that the older corporate lineage system of ascribed statuses coexisted and competed with the newer ethos of achievement by would-be autonomous self-made men, and that people tried to navigate between the two repertoires according to which best served their interests at the time, just as they navigated between spheres of exchange and scales of value in commercial life.

Thus we see a shifting landscape of possible conversions and substitutions in which people functioned as equivalents, stand-ins, and extensions of other people; people converted themselves into payments; people paid with their lives for the crimes of other people, who could be their inferiors or superiors. Something of a chimerical sense of transmutation—the sense that people are not fixed quantities with knowable, permanent attributes—is perhaps suggested by Talbot's observation that among the Kalabari, "it was considered necessary to take great care when buying a slave that the purchase should be bona fide flesh and blood, not merely a ghost drawn from the grave for some magician's profit" (1967:271).

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But there were also stubborn residues of human potential that could not be erased except by death, and grave situations in which substitution and conversion could not take place. This might help explain why one of the central uses of a human life (or rather, a human death) in the Niger Delta was to fix things, mark them, establish them, and make them permanent. Killing a person could consolidate an agreement or pin down a memory. The person who refuses to accept the agreed currency and is sacrificed to the market juju serves not only as propitiation and awful warning, but also as a seal on the agreed upon arrangements and an announcement of their stability. The death is a marker, to be noted by the trading community. This use of death is even clearer in another example given by Talbot (1967:282): "A like penalty was exacted at the opening of a new market, and also if fighting broke out within the market-place between two towns or two compounds. The punishment was imposed for two reasons: first, to appease the 'Spirit of the Market'; and secondly, to announce to neighbouring peoples—for news of such a happening travels far and fast—that the palaver was adjusted and trade in full swing again." It is the death of a human being that sends the strongest signal, attracts the strongest attention. So much so that, according to Talbot, an important man's funeral ceremonies among the Delta Igbo could be marked by the killing of one or more slaves at each of the points where the master customarily conducted his daily business: at the place where he used to bathe, eat, sleep, sit to receive guests and so on (1967:249). Published documentation of the praise poetry of the Niger Delta is scarce—though the ethnography makes it clear that the genre certainly existed—but this topographical kind of killing, gruesome as it is, has something in common with praise poetry: it makes a mark, fixes the memory of a person's activities, attaches it in striking (even horrifying) fashion to the landscape.

In *Marginal Gains* Guyer observes that the economic conversions that are important are those that "transform ephemeral income into more enduring assets," for fixing and stabilization are both "highly desired and very problematic" (2004:98). Rather than seeing everything as consumption, Guyer proposes, it might be more appropriate to see everything as investment. What both praise poetry and the use of human deaths as markers might suggest is that this desire to invest resources in order to create permanence out of a shifting multiplicity of options was a preoccupation that focused on personhood, and emerged in every domain of life.

The Exogenous Indigeneity of Invention

The individual initiative and creativity that are so strongly profiled in Kalabari ideas are thought of as being established and reproduced in collaboration with exogenous agencies. It is common in West Africa and beyond for cultural innovation to be associated with extra-societal beings ("beings

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of the wild"), and the Kalabari water spirits fit neatly into this pattern. But what is interesting is that Kalabari people picture themselves not only as capturing (almost stealing) cultural innovations from the water spirits, but also as depending on their Atlantic trading partners to make these innovations stick, at least in one story, the last I will quote from Talbot. According to one of his informants, the origin of the Sakapu club's performances in honor of the water spirits lay in an episode in which a woman went fishing, saw a mysterious presence playing on the river bank and ran away, but came back next day to hide and lie in wait.

> After a while mermaids came up out of the water and began to dance up and down upon the sand. The woman watched. After the play was over, the dancers sprang back again into the water, but one of them left behind the head-dress which she had been wearing. The woman crept up, seized it, took it home and showed it to her family. Afterwards she taught them the dance she had seen, and this became the special play of that House. When the Portuguese merchants came, the head-dress was taken to them and they were asked to send it home to be copied. This was done; so all the head-dresses now worn for this play are copies of the one let fall by the water wife." (1967:309)

Note that the Portuguese merchants do not introduce the new cultural form: their role is only to copy it—and on behalf of the Kalabari rather than for their own use. The water spirits are the forces that cause Kalabari to generate novelties. Water spirits are in a sense external: they inhabit the waterscape outside the human settlement, and are themselves sometimes associated with Europeans. But they are also the principle of individual originality. What is most noteworthy in this story is that the Kalabari do not wait passively for the water spirits to galvanize them: they take the lead, seizing the new asset when the water spirits accidentally drop it, and taking active steps to get it reproduced and established in their performance repertoire.

This is an image of intense activity, heightened agency, which nonetheless is distributed and in a sense nonpersonal (see MacGaffey 2000). This story seems to me to capture something about the originality of the production of culture and persons, in the Atlantic zone. It is an extraordinarily rich field for research, and one that Jane Guyer's exciting and thought-provoking book brings before us and incites us to explore further.

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