
The Odyssey of Michel Izard: An Appreciation

Paul Stoller

West Chester University

In the French academic system there have been two kinds of doctoral degrees. The first, *Le Doctorat 3-ème cycle*, is fairly common and can be compared roughly to doctoral degrees in the United States, the UK and elsewhere. The second degree, *Le Doctorat d'Etat*, which has been given rarely and has no equivalent in the USA or UK, is awarded for a substantial work of seasoned scholarship. Some of the great luminaries of twentieth-century French intellectual life were awarded the *Le Doctorat d'Etat*. In philosophy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Doctorat d'Etat* thesis became the classic work, *The Phenomenology of Perception*. In anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Doctorat d'Etat* became the groundbreaking work, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship and Marriage*. In African studies, Jean Rouch's *Doctorat d'Etat* was transformed into the classic text, *La religion et la magie Songhay*.

After defending his 3-ème cycle thesis and having it published as *Introduction à l'histoire des royaumes Mossi* in 1970, Michel Izard spent the next seven years working on a *Doctorate d'Etat* thesis. In 1980, through grit, determination and his characteristic rigor and thoroughness, he presented to a jury of esteemed senior scholars a massive multi-volume thesis – a masterful and intricate analysis of the history and politics of the Mossi Kingdom of Yatenga in Burkina Faso.

In my experience a thesis defense in France seems much like a tribunal. The jury sits at a long table like a panel of severe judges. The candidate sits alone in front of the jury behind a small table. The audience – friends, family and colleagues of the candidate – fills out the room behind the solitary scholar-on-trial.

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In most cases, a thesis defense is a serious affair. Each member of the jury asks challenging questions that trigger wide-ranging discussion. In Michel Izard's defense the discussion was characteristically serious. Given the array of questions, Michel Izard had the opportunity to demonstrate his enviable erudition on a wide variety of subjects: philosophy, social theory and African history and politics.

When it came time for Jean Rouch, one of the jurors, to speak, he looked at the massive multi-volume tome on history and politics. True to his reputation as a fun-loving trickster he quipped:

‘What about religion?’

The room erupted in laughter. Soon thereafter the jury voted to award a *Doctorat d'Etat* to Michel Izard. The crowd repaired to another room to enjoy the traditional ‘pot’ – champagne, hors d'oeuvres, and sweets – in celebration of remarkable scholarly accomplishment.¹

* * *

I met Michel Izard in the fall of 1978. I had been awarded post-doctoral fellowship and had the good fortune to become an Associate Member at the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale, the director of which was Claude Levi-Strauss. As a young thunderstruck scholar navigating the creaky stairwells of the old College de France building and wandering among the mind-blowing seminars of Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, it would have been easy for me to lose my way. Sensing my disorientation, Michel kindly took me under his wing. He invited me to join his relatively small and intimate African Studies seminar. As I remember it, the discussions there were focused on rigorous field methodology and detailed ethnographic representation.

Soon thereafter Michel asked me to present my research to the seminar – the first time I had made a presentation in France, let alone in French. Although I thought that my talk on myth and political legitimacy among Songhay chiefs had been an incomprehensible failure, Michel responded quite positively and invited to do a follow-up presentation the next week!

Michel, kind soul that he was, also made sure that the solitary American anthropologist had other things to do during his year in Paris. He invited me to lunches, dinners and social gatherings. He introduced me to fellow Africanists in Paris – gestures that made my postdoctoral year there a rich and rewarding experience.

* * *

Once he had defended his *Doctorat d'Etat thesis*, Michel transformed it into two works – *Gens du pouvoir, gens de la terre* (Izard 1985a), which focused exclusively on the history and politics of the aforementioned Yatenga Kingdom. The second text, *Le Yatenga précolonial* (Izard 1985b), was a work of masterful historiography. Michel Izard presented this work to his Mossi teachers, giving back to the community that had long fired his passion for history and anthropology.

During the same period of time, Michel Izard directed one of the most important seminars in French anthropology, a working group of scholars that had a stellar cast of participants, many of them members of the aforementioned Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale. He also became the Director of the Anthropology Section of France's national research organization, Le Centre Nationale de la Recherches Scientifique.

Although I could go on and on about Michel Izard's impressive array of administrative accomplishments and published works (*La fonction symbolique* [1979], *Dictionnaire de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie* [1991], and *Odysee du pouvoir* [1992], *Moogo: l'émergence d'un espace étatique ouest-africain au XVeme siècle* [2003] and *Claude Lévi-Strauss* [2004]), which have been thoroughly discussed in other tributes, I prefer to focus my concluding comments on Michel Izard, the man.

From the time we met in 1978 until his untimely death in 2012, Michel Izard and I remained friends. In the practice of his life Michel would go to great lengths to reinforce – indeed – honor the mutually obligatory bonds of friendship – a rare trait in these times of speed dating, texting, and Internet interchanges.

Our friendship deepened following a trip I made to Paris. In January 2003, I travelled there after having been diagnosed and treated for non-Hodgkin Lymphoma, a physical and emotional experience that had transformed my personal and professional life. As always, I went to see Michel and his wife, Marie Mauze.

Before we sat down to eat in their elegant apartment, Michel and Marie asked after my health.

'I've been in remission for several months', I said, 'and I feel good'.

Marie looked at me. ‘That's wonderful’. She paused a moment and said: ‘We have an announcement. Michel's been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. He begins his treatment tomorrow’.

I did not say anything, but looked at my friend looking at me. We slowly approached one another, hugged and kissed each other on the cheek. There was no need to explain, to articulate or to analyze, for that brief moment was a point of deep existential convergence. Our mutual experience of life-threatening illness had brought us – silently and effortlessly – to a profound mutual understanding. For my part, I understood profoundly that my friend was not only a brilliant scholar of things both philosophical and anthropological, but also a steadfast and loyal friend. On my subsequent visits to Paris, Michel's physical condition deteriorated, but he somehow gathered the resolve and the strength to share a meal in his apartment or even walk to a neighborhood restaurant – to honor the visit of his old American friend.

Michel Izard's rigorous and detailed ethnographic and historical scholarship has much to teach us about doing history and anthropology. His deep-seated humanity in the face of physical adversity is a model of human resilience that we should all follow. Although our memories of ideas and people may often be short, Michel Izard's constructive ideas on history and anthropology will be long remembered. My friend will be missed, but his ideas will be discussed and debated well into the future.

NOTE

¹ Jean Rouch (1982). Personal Communication.

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