

Anthropologist Edith Turner



Writing in Tongues

In everyone's life you have a moment when someone you encounter makes such a profound impact on your life, that your whole outlook or direction could change. I had such a moment when I had the opportunity to interview someone long respected in the Anthropological field, Mrs. Edith Turner. Mrs. Turner's specialization is humanistic anthropology: experiential roots of ritual, healing, shamanism, spirits and power, rites of passage, festivals, Ndembu African ritual, Inupiat healing, and shrines and healings. She is experienced in the field (about 60 years), and she has thorough knowledge of African cultures. Mrs. Turner currently teaches Ritual and Symbol, Anthropology of Performance, Comparative Healing, Ritual and Arctic Survival, Life Story, Shamanism, Healing, Experiential Anthropology, the Anthropology of Consciousness, the Anthropology of Religion, and Fieldwork and Ethnography at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia. All of these I hope to study as well. I first sent Mrs. Turner an email asking:

Mrs. Turner, or "Edie", she said to me, is a very busy woman as I'm sure you can imagine, and I managed to catch her at the time when she was planning to attend and lecture at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) Annual Meeting in Washington, DC. She replied she'd be "delighted" to help me by answering a few questions. Imagine how excited I was to be able to interview someone so respected and even famous in a sense in such a serious study as Anthropology. That Wednesday was the only opportunity that allowed her time enough to speak with me and so we set up our phone interview.

Edie is a prominent Anthropologist; she is the wife of distinguished Anthropologist Vic Turner. Victor Witter Turner (May 28, 1920 – December 18, 1983) was a cultural anthropologist best known for his work on symbols, rituals and rites of passage. His work, along with that of Clifford Geertz and others, is often referred to as symbolic and interpretive anthropology. Edie is 84 years old, mother of 5, author of several publications, and Editor

of Journal of Anthropology and Humanism. Now, that is Edie's vitae, but my personal lasting impression of her is a woman of beautiful spirit, knowledgeable, helpful, encouraging, honest, sincere, humorous, deep, and deeply spiritual.

I had emailed ahead of our phone interview, a list of ten questions that I had organized and ranged from her personal life, to education, to her professional life, and finally her spiritual life in effort to minimize our phone time so she could get on with her busy schedule. Basically, we would go over the questions I sent in a bit more detail over the phone. I had the pleasure of speaking with Edie Wednesday, November 30th by telephone. Calling her, I found that I was actually very nervous. She was after all, like a icon to me...or "star" quality. The phone rang and Edie picked up. In a cheerful accent, not as hard to understand as I had thought it would be, based on my conversations with another friend from Glasgow whom I can't understand a word of which she says, she greeted me "hello Ayo".

As I settle in at the conference room table at my job with a pen and paper ready to dictate to paper word for word what she was saying, but, I found the - conversation - just kind of "flowed" more naturally than the questions and answers session I had initially thought we would have. My first question was "when did you know you wanted to become an Anthropologist and what educational activities did you pursue to get you where you are today?" She began with telling me that she did not initially go to college or university. She said she came from a fairly well-off family where her father was a doctor. She was considered the "wild child" of the family and that because she did not take her schooling very seriously, and because she dropped out of school at age 16, her father decided not to finance her education any further. Edie said when she was 21 she met her husband, the prominent Anthropologist Victor Turner (Vic), and they moved to Zambia, Africa on a grant Vic received. Edie said it was there while living not just *with* the Zambian people, but as a Zambian, that she began to develop an interest in people and culture and that is when she began her anthropological studies. I asked Edie since she has been educated now in both the UK and in the U.S. whether anthropological studies were different between the U.K. and the U.S. She said in the UK the field is more focused on social anthropological, social anthropology is the branch of anthropology that studies how currently living human beings behave in social groups. She said "there is a respect for social context, 'not just the report'". I asked her what were the best colleges or universities outside of the U.S. if a person were interested in studying the European sociology version. She said if someone ever wanted to study abroad the best schools for Anthropology in the UK are Cambridge and St. Andrews in Glasgow.

Edith and Vic had worked many times as a team, and many times Edith's work is put into the perspective of Vic's studies as well. In the book *Heart of Lightness the Life Story of Anthropologist Edith Turner* forwarded by Ronnie Frankenberg, Frankenberg said, "Edith and Victor Turner were among the most influential researchers and teachers and social and cultural anthropology in the twentieth century. Together they, and Edie alone after Vic's death, raised the idea of participant observation to heights and depths most anthropologists never achieve". When I asked Edie about whether she works with a team now and who that team is, said that though she no longer has a partner, she considers her students as her team. She also said that she works with a small "team" as the Editor on *The Journal of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology (Society for Humanistic Anthropology)*. Humanism was a new term for me and not knowing what humanism was and how it related to Anthropology, I asked Edie to explain what Humanism meant. She said that "Humanism is not pure theory, but that the body is of the human, is the all-in-all", in other words, the body encompasses the mind, body and spirit. The Journal Edie works on elaborates a bit more and defines Humanism as "the voice of humanistic science...what it is to be human".

The field of Humanism is new to at least me and it brought me to my next question to Edie: I told her it seemed that since the study of Anthropology has been around for so long now, it seems as if it has been thoroughly studied and where she saw the future of Anthropology going, in other words I asked her, if she saw a niche in the field that no one has covered that would be the next big discovery or field of study? It was at this point that Edie turned the tables on me, and I was now subject to her questions. She asked me what my background was in my very own spirituality called *Ifa*? In the initial email to Edie with the questions, I had given her some background information on myself in which I told her that I follow and practice an old African religion called Ifa. She said the reason she asked me what my background was in Ifa was "because with the changing globalization", she "believes that the subject of Spirituality still has a niche to fulfill". She explained that "researching and writing about the *experience of how it feels* is important". She said that pretty soon the Encyclopedia of Shamanism in Africa will be published and this is the sort of material that she sees coming out in the future of Anthropology. That was the perfect segue for me to ask about what was the last anthropological book she had read. She said she recommends a book by Karen Carthy Brown called *Mama Lola* it is a book about a Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn, New York.

I asked Edie, how does an Anthropologist market themselves in the field today, she laughed and said "this may be almost impossible". She said she only knew of a few Anthropologists who were able to successfully market themselves, one being Barbara Myerhoff, anthropologist, filmmaker, and founder of the Center for Visual

Anthropology at the University of Southern California, Myerhoff was a renowned scholar in the field of visual anthropology and became known for doing a movie called *Number Our Days*, which was a documentary study of a community of elderly Jews in Venice, California. She said also Margaret Mead. Margaret Mead is known as probably one of the most intellectual and distinguished Anthropologists of our time. I asked her if any Anthropologist had become or could become millionaires or earn a six-figure income in Anthropology? She said laughing, “You tell me, what do you think?”. I didn’t expect to *answer* the question, but I said – I believe an anthropologist could earn millions if they were to join a major museum, or do something groundbreaking, but I imagine in most cases the answer to be no - she said, “that is right”. I asked if it were fair to say that becoming a millionaire is not the expectation of most Anthropologists and that most are in the field for enjoyment of people and culture. She agreed. She also said – Anthropology is a “modest career”.

Edie herself seems to be very modest. As I drew my questions to a close because I knew she was limited on time, I asked her what advice would she give a student and someone interested in pursuing Anthropology. She said when in anthropological study instead of taking photographs, or using recorders – “*live* with the people”, use your memory, and join!” She said she emphasizes and stress the importance of this with her students all the time. She said but most of all “be sincere, don’t be too narrow, honor, go the whole way, love everybody, learn to enjoy writing, always scribble. When writing a paper write around funny ideas”. “**WRITE IN TONGUES** (and tweak it later)”, and then she said “work like hell!”

The last words she said to me, softly as if she were singing...

“go all the whole way, like on eagle wings, it’ll make you glow like the sun!”