

TWO VIEWS OF THE PANARE

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UNDER THE RAINBOW: NATURE AND SUPERNATURE AMONG THE PANARE INDIANS. By JEAN-PAUL DUMONT. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976.)

THE HEADMAN AND I: AMBIGUITY AND AMBIVALENCE IN THE FIELD-WORK EXPERIENCE. By JEAN-PAUL DUMONT. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978.)

These two books, taken together, are a fascinating contribution to the debate on the nature of anthropological investigation and interpretation and an important presentation of a relatively little known tribal society in Venezuela from two quite different perspectives. The books are as different as night and day, or perhaps nature and supernature. Although published only two years apart, the earlier one, a revision of Dumont's 1972 dissertation, is devoted to showing how the Panare think of themselves, and is an attempt to "unravel or unspin the seamless web of Panare thought" (p. 4) based on the structuralist method presented by Lévi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology* and the *Mythologiques*. It is thus the structural presentation of Panare thought. The second book is both an examination of the mutual interaction between an anthropologist and the object of his study and a presentation of the social organization of the Panare. The separateness of the two approaches to the Panare seems to reflect a conflict the author felt in the field between producing a thesis about the Panare and the necessary difficulty of dealing with the thought processes of individual Panare who were confronted with him in all his hairy strangeness. Of the two, I find myself considerably more sympathetic to the second book, though my reading of the earlier one is now considerably different, and the two of them together provide interesting ethnography and contrast.

The presentation of Panare thought in and of itself is complicated by the apparent lack of Panare philosophers. The Panare refused to tell Dumont their myths and, unless the Panare differ from most other Lowland South American groups, he did not have conversations with the likes of an Ogotemméli of the Dogon. In fact, the Panare never speak for themselves in this book. Hardly a word is heard from them directly: poetry, oratory, song texts, even casual conversations are all ignored for

a formal presentation of Panare principles of thought. The analysis, then, is derived from observational data—from the activities of social life rather than the discourse of philosophers. That is of course where most cultural systems are expressed, but in social life philosophy is also improvisation, it is process as well as continuity. Dumont presents us with what he calls a grammar of Panare thought. But since we are not Panare, and since he has not presented us with any Panare social life in its full complexity, the reader will find little with which to evaluate the analysis. Although Panare logic is expressed in the concrete (which they seem to prefer to myths), we only see it in the abstract (a domain particularly attractive to philosophers of our own, occidental, culture). In this analysis of the “implicit mythology through which Panare cultural order constitutes itself” (p. 164) we do not even have the text of a myth, or the concrete analysis of the use of space in a given Panare village at a particular moment in its political and historical life (these appear, however, in the second book).

Under the Rainbow does make a number of important contributions to Lowland South American ethnography through the examination among the Panare of some of Lévi-Strauss’ insights on the region. Interesting in this respect are discussions of hearing and taste, time, astronomy, food and emetics. Particularly valuable is Dumont’s discussion of the inadequacy of the dyadic nature-culture distinction for many groups. Instead he proposes a triad of nature-culture-supernature. In my opinion this formulation applies well to such groups as those of the Upper Xingu, while the dyadic model remains useful for the dual-minded northern Gê (both groups of societies are located in central Brazil). Furthermore, Dumont is quite conscious of his use of structural analysis, and raises interesting questions about it, although he tends to ignore symbolic complexity and ambiguity.

Ambiguity and ambivalence are the subjects of *The Headman and I*. This is neither the philosophical reconsideration of a long-passed experience (if Dumont dreamed of entering the Academie Française he does not report it) nor the Anthropologist-as-Adventurer (he was apparently quite content to be left behind on the hunts and still managed to get enough to eat). It is rather the careful examination of his excursion into Panare society and the mutual adjustments that were made by him and the Panare. He describes how his inclusion in the kinship network was crucial to his work. This was not an attempt to “go native” (the last thing he and the Panare wanted), nor was it an empty gesture on the part of the Panare. As Dumont reveals, they were using him for reasons of their own, just as he was using them. One gets the impression, from the photograph of a naked boy standing in Dumont’s huge leather jungle boots, holding a cigarette and squinting up into the empyrean (cap-

tion: "How Kanapwey viewed me") that the Panare understood Dumont sooner than he understood them. His integration into the kinship network, with all of its ambivalence, is the point of departure for a discussion of Panare kinship, marriage, and political process (all of course related). In the second half of the book, considerable attention is devoted to interethnic relations and to the position of the Panare with respect to Venezuelan national models of development and the Christian missionary designs on Panare thought.

Just as the analyses of "social dramas" reveal both general principles and processes, so Dumont's own examination of his experience with the Panare reveals general principles and processes of Panare social life and culture. Here is the crucial meeting of Panare minds (subtleties of structural points of view are rampant) and the anthropological mind in its graduate student, bachelor, French specificity under specific historical conditions. The "anthropological drama" is itself important. It is only through the meeting of minds and bodies, through the interaction of senses, emotions, and philosophies that anthropology is accomplished. These two books provide the basis for considerable discussion of the nature and the results of the meeting of men and men's minds.