Book Review Essays

Two Thousand and What? Anthropological Moments and Methods for the Next Century

IVAN BRADY
SUNY College at Oswego

Ethnography and Human Development: Context and Meaning in Social Inquiry. Richard Jessor, Anne Colby, and Richard A. Shweder, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 516 pp.

Interpretive Anthropology: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century. Norman K. Denzin. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997. 325 pp.

These books address what has been referred to commonly in the past decade and a half as the crisis in anthropology: the conflict of perspective and method brought on by the proliferation of "post-isms," now marked by a kind of demolition derby among competing models in several related disciplines. The authors aim at salvaging ethnographic observation from the junkyards of its experimentation. They find hope for the future in intellectual engineering, collaboration, and style of thought: in recognizing that our past practices were too often methodologically lopsided, recklessly unself-conscious, blind in strategic spots to the cross-cultural roads we traveled, hardly the legacy ethnographers want to carry them into the new millennium. None of the authors (except perhaps Denzin) has abandoned the quest for an empirically grounded science of culture. Like the rest of us who have tried to see and know and report across the inevitable boundaries of culture and experience that separate us from those we study, the scholars in these two volumes want a vehicle that will allow them to "speak in the name of the real" about social reality and how society works. They want to neutralize (by knowing) observer interference, to maintain rigor and depth of inquiry without obfuscation, to write robust and accurate representations of other minds, behaviors, and places, to do so in full view of the metaphoric power and embedded constraints of our reportorial languages, and to be believed in the process (acknowledged and respected as an "expert"). So the question addressed by both books is really one of progress. Given the difficulties of recent years, have we progressed as a social science, as a discipline? If so, how do we mark it and what will we do with it?

One way to mark progress in the study of society is to focus on the productivity of analytic and research methods. The Jessor, Colby, and Shweder volume resulted from the 1993 conference "Ethnographic Approaches to the Study of Human Development," and it suggests that now may be a good time for joining two distinguished traditions that have always traded harsh criticisms—the ethnographic and the developmental—by systematically integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, where the former are equated with ethnography per se and the study of small groups and individuals and the latter with more conventional social-science statistical analysis and larger-level behavioral theory. They hope to bring new methodological and theoretical strengths to each tradition and to offer new solutions to the vexing problems of development studies in the process. The contributors are sociologists, cognitive scientists, educators, historians, demographers, speech therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and anthropologists in the conventional sense, each of whom addresses a special problem of studying human development. By theory and implication, they collectively engage problems that beset modern cultural anthropology directly.

Thus, writes editor Jessor in his introduction,

> despite a continuing sense of crisis, the openness of the postpositivist era, the compelling logic of methodological pluralism, and the troubled sense that established approaches to social inquiry have yielded a less than bountiful harvest have all created a new context in which there is keen interest in shifting the orientation and enlarging the armamentarium of social research. [p. 5]

Jessor finds that interest evident in the renewed attention by students of social behavior and development to ethnographic or qualitative approaches (used interchangeably here), which have always come up shorter on scientific status than more objective or quantitative methods. He is encouraged by the fact that ethnographic methods address so many of the central themes or shortcomings in the current methodological

anthrosource
www.anthrosource.net

and epistemological crises of the social disciplines, including naturalistic descriptions of settings and contexts, interpretations of meaning in social behavior and interaction, attempts to understand action from the perspective of the actor, and narrating coherent "stories" of social life in which actual persons rather than quantitative or theoretical abstractions are the agents who adapt to changing times and circumstances. He cautions against drawing absolute lines between qualitative and quantitative methods, noting wisely that it is how data are used (interpreted), as opposed to the means through which they are counted and collected, which determines whether a study is more one or the other. Jessor also does not believe that qualitative methods should be restricted a priori to the context of discovery. He sees developing the role of ethnography in the context of justification and producing complementary and converging information through joint reliance on qualitative and quantitative procedures as powerful strategies for advancing social knowledge. Nonetheless, Jessor notes that ethnography's epistemological status continues to be challenged by the legacy of positivism and its traditional concerns about validity and objectivity. The essays in this volume address these issues logically by argument and empirically through rich ethnographic yield and emerge with the consensus that "qualitative and quantitative methods of social inquiry, though often asking different kinds of questions, share a common epistemological foundation and a common philosophy of science" (p. 7).

In a lengthy and thoughtful chapter called "True Ethnography: The Lore, the Law, and the Lure," the keynote address of the conference, Richard Shweder addresses the problematic notion of ethnography that aims to make insiders intelligible to outsiders through productive method and a justifiable epistemological platform. Concerned alternately with methodological diversity, adequacy, and justification, Shweder starts his assessment of the state of ethnographic methods with a comment on pedagogy. He laments that most American anthropology departments do not require courses in methodology. Methodological advice tends to take more the form of "lore" than "laws," he says (p. 14). Plenty of help is available for those who are, as some significant philosophy of science has been since Feyerabend, "against method." Shweder is "for method" just as many anthropologists are "for ethnography," which, as Shweder points out, is not the same thing. Some are in between—neither for nor against method, simply "innocent" of it. Still others believe that "if you are really serious and want to get to know a place well then the most important thing you can do is just 'muck around' a lot like a good journalist and follow your nose" (p. 16).

This is not news to most of the research community. No particular method dominates in the natural sciences, and both the social sciences and physics have trouble with controlled experimentation in the study of problems appropriate to the subject matters of their disciplines. That is not to say that research is ever without method—that is, a pattern of consciously articulated activity for discovering, sorting, and interpreting data that normally comprises the elements of observation, hypothesis formation, prediction, and testing. But, formal ideals aside, the reality of research is that it can be extremely open-ended. Reversed cycles of reasoning and testing, aesthetic insights, metaphoric comparisons, and the powerful but always ambiguously defined sense of intuition ("I had a hunch"), among other considerations, have also proven to be essential to scientific experimentation. So methodological pluralism has to include "mucking around" as an option. A problem only arises when that is touted as an ideal or exclusive framework. It cannot be privileged but it must be allowed. Thus the issue is not so much being "against method" for anyone as it is that singularity of method does not seem to apply anywhere. The contributors to this volume do not all settle on the same epistemological page but they are to varying degrees, like Shweder, "for method" and "for methodological pluralism," especially where the diversity reaches out to qualitative methods and ethnography. The postmodern penchant for talking about science as "one of many ways of knowing" begs many of the same issues.

"True ethnography," Shweder says in the same spirit, but aimed more precisely at problems of justification, "resides somewhere between solipsism and superficiality" (p. 17). Rejecting both extremes, Shweder searches for defensible middle ground and for a universal framework that will liberate us from some of the epistemological shackles of cultural relativism and the principle of solipsism. The mission of true ethnography, he says, is "to gain access to other minds and other ways of life so as to represent what it is like to be a differently situated human being" and to do so with at least a "ring of authenticity" (p. 17). True ethnographic theories will

> tell us what it means to be differently situated—what it is like to have different preferences (values, goals, tastes, desires, ideals of personal well-being and of developmental competence) and/or what it is like to live with different constraints (information, causal beliefs, abilities, dispositions, resources, technology, systems of domination or control). Its methods make use of the things people say and do to each other in everyday life, as well as the things they strategically and deliberately say and do to us on special "scientific" occasions (for example, when we ask them to answer questions in an interview or to narrate a life history), to construct a plausible and intelligible account

as
anthrosource
www.anthrosource.net

about what it is like to be someone else. Yet true ethnography also aims to deepen our understanding of "otherness" and to move us beyond the cover stories, idealized self-representations, well-rehearsed verbal modes of public image management, and strategic manipulations of those whose lives we seek to understand. [pp. 17–18]

With Quine's principle of charity in mind, that is, assuming that the other is like ourselves and therefore open to empathetic construction and discovery, Shweder develops a quest for "universal original multiplicity" that underlies a potential unity among all human beings. Such unity is not restricted to our commonalities and sameness. For Shweder, it obtains in a condition "which makes each of us so variegated that others become accessible and imaginable to us through some aspect of our own complex self" (p. 24). According to this principle, which can also be expressed as "universalism without the uniformity" and does not require accepting solipsism as a principle, there is no need to worry

> if the only head you can ever get inside is your own, as long as the only head you can get inside is complex enough to contain within it everyone else's head as well. The real problem with solipsism . . . is the premise that the only way to understand the mental life of something that has a mental life is by getting inside *its* head, by experiencing it or observing it directly. I think this point of criticism is what . . . Geertz . . . had in mind when he said that one does not have to be an empath to be a true ethnographer. True ethnography can stand on the assumption that it is possible to understand what it is like to be a differently situated human being precisely because to understand the mental life of a differently situated human being one does not have to get inside his or her head. That is the conclusion drawn by such philosophers as Wittgenstein and Ryle, who are sometimes described as philosophical behaviorists, [and] by those anthropologists (such as Geertz) who were influenced by Wittgenstein and Ryle. [p. 25]

Shweder's self-declared "mind reading" in this solution is likely to get the most attention from critics: it is impossible in the absolute, a rhetorical challenge at minimum to most observers. Shweder, however, means something both more fundamental and possible by that concept than the ordinary speaker. Minds are accessible through the interpretation and analysis of what they say and do. Mental state concepts are used to model the information. Culture is distinguished from behavior in the process as

> a conceptual model of the preferences and constraints that characterize a "moral community" [e.g., sanctionable behavior such as husband-wife sleeping arrangements, the family meal, and saying "thank you" in Anglo-America; menstrual seclusion and husband-wife avoidance in public places in rural Hindu India—p. 27], one whose members are each other's reference group. [Jessor p. 10]

Complex societies have multiple cultures at this level. True ethnography is in this sense "a hypothetical model representing the preferences and constraints exhibited" in their behavior (discourse and praxis) as "members of a moral community" (Shweder p. 48).

But whose model, ours or theirs? The members of moral communities construct models of and for their own behavior, "so it is a mistake to assume that insiders cannot speak for themselves" (p. 48). It is also a mistake to assume that the insider's cultural model is "the best or only way to model the preferences and constraints exhibited in the behavior of members of a moral community" (p. 48), in part because culturally structured information is not necessarily evenly distributed in any community. No solipsistic privilege can be

> accorded to what insiders say. Like the thing called culture itself, the native's point of view is nothing more than a theoretical model, articulated in a mental-state language (a folk psychologese) intelligible to the ethnographer, and constructed as a theoretical representation of the hypothesized preferences and constraints exhibited in the observed behavior of some "other." [p. 49]

It does not therefore really matter, in Shweder's view, who constructs the model, so "long as it provides a plausible and intelligible account of the concepts and ideas exhibited in the behavior of a designated moral community" (p. 49). What really matters is that we get it right by some justifiable process that inspires confidence in the results, including not substituting guesswork for what can be observed and guarding against purely inventing the viewpoint of the actor (pp. 58, 60).

Shweder ducks many of the deeper complications of the philosophical and epistemological problems he addresses without (to his credit) missing them altogether, while articulating clearly the analytic structure of his own inquiry—one that might be replicated in form yet sort cultural differences between the observer and the observed in various applications of social science research. His results can be evaluated for their utility and were in fact discussed at the conference. Among the unresolved questions, it was suggested that he might have dealt more particularly with those related to validity. Assessing validity (as opposed to credibility) in methods and results is one problem none of the authors, including Shweder, can escape (see Jessor p. 9). Many of the contributors engage it as an issue; others skirt it, and all with about the same level of indeterminacy.

The essays by Norm Denzin and the late Donald T. Campbell were invited commentaries on some of the other chapters in *Ethnography and Human Development* and constitute an exchange of opposing views, if not an index of what divides many of the combatants in

anthrosource
www.anthrosource.net

the current crisis of social science thinking. More importantly, some accommodation of their division is reached in conclusion. Following an old argument by Lévi-Strauss, Denzin sees ethnographers as bricoleurs producing the situation-sensitive patchwork that is bricolage for outcomes. This practical, methodological pluralism in studies of human development, interpretive theory, and ethnographic inquiry is our pattern for the moment. Denzin sees it as plainly uncentered, lacking in methodological agreement and unassailed theory, and in need of an innovative and acceptable single text or two to point the way forward. He reviews the twin problems of legitimation in social theory and interpretive research and the representational crisis that makes problematic the direct link between experience and text in qualitative research and locates them within a history of ethnographic research in the United States that bridges five particular moments: the traditional (1900–50), the modernist, or golden, age (1950–70), blurred genres (1970–86), the crisis of representation (1986–90), and the postmodern (1990 to the present). The fact that each of the "earlier moments still operates in the present, either as legacy or as a set of practices that researchers continue to follow or argue against," leaves us with more paradigms, strategies, and methods of inquiry than ever and has contributed directly to our present "moment of discovery and rediscovery" in which "new ways of looking, interpreting, arguing, and writing are debated and discussed" (p. 135). The core of this new sensibility, as we have all now heard so often, is the argument against any discourse claiming exclusive privilege, any method or theory claiming universal applicability and authority (p. 129).

Addressing the lessons of the conference, Shweder wants to rethink what we already have, de-bug some fears, clarify some methods, trim out some epistemology, and rake a little reality, all with an eye to the practical. Denzin asks for something truly new:

> Perhaps we need to invent a new language, a new form of writing that goes beyond auto-ethnography, "teletheory," and "mystories". . . . This must be the language of a new sensibility, a new reflexivity, a language that refuses the old categories, a language that reflexively and parasitically . . . charts its own course against history's repressive structures of economy, religion, race, class, and gender. This new language, post-structural to the core, will be personal, emotional, biographically specific, minimalist in its use of theoretical terms. It will allow ordinary people to speak out, and to articulate the interpretive theories that they use to make sense of their lives. This new language will express the personal struggles of each writer as he or she breaks free of the bonds that connect to the past. This language will be visual, cinematic, kaleidoscopic, rhizomatic, rich, and thick in its own descriptive detail, always interactive as it moves back and forth between lived experience and the cultural texts that shape and write that experience. [p. 146]

Such a language, of course, may be impossible for any single individual to adopt and remain coherent. But these recommendations are a fair index of what troubles us in contemporary ethnography—what we might aim to resolve in our collective methodological and reportorial futures if we wish to address the most critical problems of the present.

For his part, Campbell, like Denzin, is sensitive to the past but forecloses on nothing for the future. He remains committed to the prospects of scientific realism and improved science guided by validity concerns, even if they cannot be achieved completely because of several obstacles, including methodological cultural relativism and communication failures (Jessor p. 13). Campbell does not deny the cultural situatedness of all knowledge and the social construction of reality that grips us all. He says that problematizing knowledge of the other is appropriate but regarding it (and, by implication, scientific realism) as impossible to obtain is wrong-headed. He rejects what he calls (leaning in Denzin's direction) "ontological nihilism"—denial of the possibility of valid reference to an independent reality—and states,

> We need an epistemology and methodology which explains how, and to what degree, knowing the other is possible, as well as the common errors made in the attempt. Mainstream postpositivist philosophy of science points the way both in its holistic coherence-based strategy for belief revision, and in its principle of charity for the radical translation problems. What we find here is a convergence with the older validity-seeking hermeneutics. To [Quine's] principle of charity must be added principles from methodological cultural relativism which call attention to the cultural contributions to cognition operating unconsciously to bias both the ethnographer's and the other's perception of what is objectively real. [p. 169]

Thus wanting to reduce methodological bias and retain a modified cultural relativism while keeping the goal of understanding the other intact, Campbell gives some legitimacy to the postpositivist project and its radical relativists (cf. Denzin pp. 138–139).

I have focused on the first part of the volume edited by Jessor et alia ("Epistemology and Ethnographic Representation"), particularly on the chapters by Shweder, Denzin, and Campbell, because they appear to have the widest analytic implications for anthropology's contemporary crisis of method and theory. But I should say that the first section also includes a persuasive contribution by R. P. McDermott and Hervé Varenne on the culture of disability in the context of human development, and a pointed essay by Howard Becker that evaluates the relationships between qualitative and quantitative research and rejects

anthrosource
www.anthrosource.net

arguments for any fundamental epistemological differences between the two. Other essays in the volume include another by Shweder on *quanta* versus *qualia* as objects of ethnographic method; ways to study socialization; neighborhood social organization; the ruling places of inner-city youth; role-relationship models, a practice-based approach to studying cognitive development in its sociocultural context (part 2, "Ethnography as Method"); human development in its multiple contexts; the problems of ideology and subjectivity in the study of menopause in Japan and North America; generational paradigms in human development as interlocking parts of ethnography, biography, and cultural history; ethnography and social context among inner-city African American teens; comparative and longitudinal ethnography in the study of early childhood transitions; and some fascinating ethnographic work on nature, second nature, and individual development (part 3, "Ethnography and the Context of Development"). Part 4 has one chapter ("Concluding Overview") by John Modell on the uneasy engagement of human development studies and ethnography. It marks the challenge of this mix as promising work for the future.

In *Interpretive Anthropology* Denzin outlines the same historical periods and premises—ethnographic "moments"—described for his contribution to Jessor et alia, but in greater detail. As a sociologist, much of his text focuses on explicitly sociological problems and their histories in the discipline. Anthropologists get in on the act both as contributors and voyeurs, seldom as primary theme. But the overlap between ethnographic observation and writing in sociology and anthropology is always implied or articulated directly, and he makes good use of the pioneering work by Geertz, Marcus, Clifford, and a few others as it engages anthropology and many other disciplines on common ground. The result for Denzin is a robust evaluation of ethnography, which he defines reflexively as "that form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about" (p. xvii). He includes the forms and problems of ethnographic writing in the twilight years of the 20th century as they phase into the prospects for interpretive, ethnographic writing in the 21st century: ethnography's "sixth moment" (pp. xi, xvii).

The millennium turn appears to Denzin as a good time to take stock of ethnography's development and crises to date, to review its experimentalism, and take a brave step into an unfocused pool of controversy toward future resolutions. Nine premises organize his readings of this situation. First, following Derrida, Denzin holds that "a theory of the social is also a theory of writing" (p. xii). Second, as American culture has gone postmodern, postcolonial, and multinational, blurring boundaries, so has American ethnography, because it is deeply embedded in American and world culture. Third, following Tyler, ethnography has become the discourse of the postmodern world, but the meaning of ethnography—how to engage, produce, and understand it—has been problematized by global and legal problems. Fourth, given that "the worlds we study are created, in part, through the texts that we write and perform about them," and that "the writer can no longer presume to be able to present an objective, noncontested account of the other's experiences," self-reflexivity in ethnography is no longer optional. Fifth, "ethnography is a gendered project" in the sense that "feminist, postcolonial, and queer theory question the Oedipal logic of the heterosexual, narrative ethnographic text that reflexively positions the ethnographer's gender-neutral (or masculine) self within a realist story about the 'other,' " leaving the ethnographer to work within a "hybrid" reality. Sixth, "ethnography is a moral, allegorical, and therapeutic project" that moves "people to action," rests on a socially constructed distinction between fact and truth, and "will help men and women endure and prevail" by recording "the agonies, pains, successes, and tragedies of human experience" as well as "the deeply felt emotions of love, dignity, pride, honor, and respect." Seventh, "the avowed humanistic commitment to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual," despite regular bumps and ruptures, will potentially unite all interpretive communities within the field of qualitative research. Eighth, noting that "endless self-reflections and self-referential criticisms will produce few texts anchored in the worlds of concrete human experience," Denzin argues nonetheless that they should be. And ninth, criticisms of the experimental versions of ethnography that have appeared since Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture* (1986) will "serve to police the boundaries of ethnography, inscribing a proper version of how this form of scientific work should be done" and producing "a traditional bias that argues that ethnographers study real people in the real world"—following the (albeit flawed) models of founder Malinowski and others (pp. xii–xvi).

For Denzin, these premises presage ethnography's transformation in the next century, including changes in its moral as well as practical forms. The choices he sees as available to ethnographers at the moment are interconnected and include getting the ethnographer to write "messy texts" while acting as a scribe for the other, producing a joint document while becoming a "coauthor with the other," producing "a purely autoethnographic text based on the author's personal experiences," constructing a performance text, and/or experimenting with "the writing styles created by the new journalists, even those pursuing mystery fiction"

anthrosource
www.anthrosource.net

(p. xvi). Most of the book is devoted to exploring each of these options in detail.

Overall Denzin recommends a model that is consistent with his nine premises and with his arguments in *Ethnography and Human Development.* It is identified explicitly as the "feminist communitarian ethic" of ethnographic writing. He suggests we might use it to advance the ethnographic project across the disciplines in a productive, satisfying, and ethical way. It requires developing norms for ethnographic writing that presume a dialogical view of the self; produce "narratives that ennoble human experience while facilitating civic transformations in the public (and private) spheres"; promote "universal human solidarity"; ratify "the dignity of the self and the value of human life"; commit to "human justice and the empowerment of groups of interacting individuals"; are "not written to produce harm for others"; are "always allegorical" in the sense that a symbolic tale is "not just a record of human experience," but also "a form of experience for the reader" through which they can "discover moral truths about themselves"; and are utopian tales of "self and social redemption" that bring "a moral compass back into the reader's (and the writer's) life" (pp. xiv–xv). Guided by these norms, the ethnographer's task is to discover, collect, and tell the "multiple 'truths' that operate in the social world" in the form of the stories people build around the meanings of acts that matter to them and that move them to action (p. xv). Like his previous recommendations, and however notable as an index of what seems to ail ethnographic writers today, the criteria for this project are a tall order—virtually unattainable in any single publication, if not beyond our reach altogether in certain respects. Nevertheless, Denzin's criticism points in noble directions and his summaries are detailed and clear. So serious attention to the problem of focusing messy texts and messier arguments on methods and mimesis in ethnography should include consulting Denzin's book. Harboring fewer misconceptions about who did what to whom with what kind of instrument and when can help move the process of social analysis into the next moment of more productive (and perhaps more agreeable) methods and writing.

These books add up to more than just another retrospective prompted by the epistemological and methodological chaos of recent years and by the self-imposed urgency to declare progress and new intentions at the gate of the new millennium. It is easy to agree with Jessor et alia that some changes in the culture of social science inquiry are needed, an ecumenical approach to social inquiry is appropriate for the times, and methodological pluralism is the right alternative to methodological imperialism; and with Denzin progress in interpretive ethnography depends on consciousness of previous failings and sensitivity to the cultural contexts of both observed and observer for the future. We should as a discipline continue to revise and even multiply in approach. But it is equally clear to me that the price for that should not be to abandon the quest for commensurate theories across disciplines and cultures or, for that matter, the search for human universals in language, culture, and behavior.

Moreover, as Shweder and others remind us, there are more similarities than differences in qualitative and quantitative methods, and similar epistemological arguments underlie both. Ethnography has been identified in the wide net of social science more with patterns and methods of discovery than with the logical and philosophical justifications (and sometimes tedious, brain-twisting agonies) of theory construction and legitimation, but there is nothing other than prejudice and misunderstanding preventing a careful evaluation of ethnography in the latter arena. Confusing the differences between discovery and justification (although they can never be separated absolutely) has contributed to some of the ongoing controversy in anthropology concerning postmodernism and its real or perceived challenges to the business-as-usual positivism of the past. A more formal look at the controversy through a dialogue on methods of discovery and justification might unblock some of the present impasses that trouble decisions on the "kinds of anthropology" to support as researchers or mentors in the academy. It might also debunk some of the straw men anthropologists have constructed to support extreme arguments about unworthy opposition in scientific or humanistic approaches to the study of society.

There is also no substitute for long-term exposure to the problems we attempt to evaluate or solve. Solipsism may be hard to swallow but shallowness is the enemy of it all. Malinowski's ghost, nicked and worn from all the talk about him over the years, insists that we continue to immerse ourselves in the islands of cultures we study. We can add that to a toolbox full of mucking around and structured questionnaires, statistical analysis and poetic immersion, systems awareness (ecology and religion, and so forth), and interdisciplinary conversations as we search for validity in renewed, revised, and recombined methods. It seems fair to claim as well that none of our work will matter much if it does not represent us and our relationships with the others of our cultural and intellectual frontiers in language that is generally accessible. But the saving graces for productive ethnography will always be rigor (with its unwritten rule of not substituting guesswork for what can be observed directly) and depth (defined according to the problem at hand and pursued carefully for the logical and culturally valid arrangement of its parts). Depth leads to volume, and volume is not all bad. What may be seen by strict methodologists as

anthrosource
www.anthrosource.net

reportorial "gravy" (verbiage—self-conscious, poetic, or otherwise) in fieldwork texts can be important for other reasons. One is establishing context, which, of course, is practically everything for determining meaning. Another is opening the door for richer comparative studies by potentially increasing the range of ethnographic information available to us, about ourselves as well as the people we study.

Proliferating this multidimensional package through a commitment to richer and thicker ethnographies that are more methodologically sensitive than ever might make a good start for the next century. If these ethnographies are packed on the shelves next to a bundle of handbooks on avant-garde methods and philosophical justification for employing them, some smart student somewhere is bound to pick up on the overlap, produce a novel synthesis, reduce anthropology's epistemological schizophrenia about qualitative and quantitative methods by a pound or two, and take the lead for a while, especially if the works are driven by clear and powerful writing. Nonetheless, with or without student messiahs and the smoothly blended methods of old enemies, anthropological thinking will always reflect the essence of its subject matter: diversity in thought and deed at the level of ethnographic particulars, commonality in purpose and design at the global level. Many in the one, one in the many. The process is ongoing, oblivious to calendars, and guaranteed to be muddled in the middle. The terms of engagement may change—and the fact that they do may be some measure of disciplinary progress—but methodological conflict is here to stay. ■

After a Men's Cult

Joel Robbins
Reed College

The Cassowary's Revenge: The Life and Death of Masculinity in a New Guinea Society. Donald Tuzin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. 248 pp.

How do institutions die and what happens when they do? For an anthropology concerned with the spread of global modernity into "local" societies, these questions ought immediately to come to mind. Yet they rarely do. So concerned are we with cultural persistence—with the ways old ideas stay vital beneath the flashy new clothes of syncretic formulations or transform themselves only subtly in the structure of the conjuncture—that we have missed the story of what happens when the tall trees of the local institutional forest come crashing down.

The men's cult (Tambaran) of the Ilahita Arapesh of Papua New Guinea was such a tall tree, a central institution that "completely dominated traditional social life and ideology" (p. 2). Separating men from women and demanding of the former that they keep their secrets to themselves, the Tambaran made Ilahita a "gender-inflected society" (p. 182) that drew its energy largely from the need to reproduce itself without foregrounding the importance of contact between the sexes.

Despite the crucial role it played in organizing and giving meaning to their social life, however, in 1984 the men of Ilahita "murdered" (Tuzin's word) their Tambaran. Acting without pressure from missionaries or other outsiders, they revealed its secrets to the women and thus ensured that it would never again serve as the point of orientation from which their culture proceeded. This was a courageous act of "self-determination" on the part of the men, but it was also an act that was propelled by a complex set of forces which set in train an equally complex set of changes that Tuzin explores in this rich and original book.

Tuzin notes the recent sociological changes that threatened the Tambaran: the women and young men's resistance to the old order, and the individualist ideas that were spreading throughout the society. But equally important in determining the Tambaran's fate was a long-standing cultural contradiction that took advantage of the changing times to push for resolution. This contradiction followed from the fact that the cult had only entered Ilahita in the last century, coming to them from their Abelam neighbors. On arrival, it imposed its gender ideology upon a culture that had required men to be solicitous of their wives and to nurture their children. With these older ideas still in play, generations of men both practiced the Tambaran and felt guilt over the deceptions they perpetrated on the women. Not surprisingly, they worried over the cataclysm that would result if the women ever discovered the Tambaran's secrets.

This already tangled web must make room for one further strand. Through a striking piece of historical reconstruction, Tuzin demonstrates that at the same time that the Tambaran entered their society, the Ilahita also took up a myth about a swan maiden that had been brought to their region by Malay traders. In the myth a man marries a swan maiden (now a cassowary) after stealing her skin, only to be killed by her when she discovers his deceit. As Tuzin points out, by highlighting

anthrosource
www.anthrosource.net