

Culture



William L. MERRILL, *Rarámuri Souls: Knowledge and Social Process in Northern Mexico*, Washington, D.C. and London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988. 237 pages

Michael Lambek

Volume 8, numéro 2, 1988

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085921ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1085921ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lambek, M. (1988). Compte rendu de [William L. MERRILL, *Rarámuri Souls: Knowledge and Social Process in Northern Mexico*, Washington, D.C. and London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988. 237 pages]. *Culture*, 8(2), 102–104. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1085921ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1988

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

Érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

gate unfastened or closed in a different way, she knows that someone has been around. The gate stands guard at the border of her own carefully tended and observed environment (p.9).

The discussion of Emily's songs which follows is equally revealing of Shoshone musical thought because Vander provides a wealth of data which is clearly organized according to song genre: Sun Dance, Peyote, Women's Dance and Wolf Dance, Handgame, Giveaway, Chokecherry, War Bonnet and Euro-American. There are what appear to be meticulous transcriptions of representative songtypes followed by readable music analyses clearly contributing to the meaning of the songs. Throughout the information on the songs of the five Shoshone women, there is notable attention to detail: the text is rich with 1) references to Shoshone folk narrative and belief, 2) the associations among Shoshone speech, song and song words, and 3) scholarly footnotes and well-chosen photographs. Hence, although definitely musically oriented, it is likely that many scholars of native studies would enjoy this book.

Perhaps the most outstanding aspect of the work is the skillful interweaving of the informants' personal statements, of references to scholarly research, and of the author's own comments and reactions, all of which form a satisfying songprint of each female singer. This very density and coherence leads, from my point of view, to difficulty in retrieving information from the text, which brings me to Vander's conclusions. We must be very grateful for the author's cumulative songprint chart showing the types of songs sung by each woman, and for the clear listing of increasing female participation in traditional Shoshone music. There are a multitude of themes running through the text such as Shoshone music aesthetics and changes in powwow music practice; a more substantial synthesizing conclusion would have made this plethora of information even more accessible to readers. Nevertheless, Vander has clearly achieved, even in the conclusion, her purpose of presenting the songs and musical experience of five Shoshone women. Undoubtedly, the onus is on the readers of this intricate, multi-dimensional work to discover their own set of meanings.

William L. MERRILL, *Rarámuri Souls: Knowledge and Social Process in Northern Mexico*, Washington, D.C. and London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988. 237 pages.

by Michael Lambek
University of Toronto

In this work William Merrill attempts for the reproduction and circulation of knowledge about the soul in a Rarámuri (Tarahumara) community in northwestern Mexico. The aim thus diverges from what we have come to expect from contemporary ethnographies on religious topics. Though there is much subtle interpretation here, this is not primarily a hermeneutic account of the soul in which the anthropologist taxes his interpretive skills to arrive at a nuanced and complex version of another people's reality. Rather, the author relies precisely on what his informants tell him in fairly straightforward terms about the nature of the soul. The problem is that the accounts they provide are far from identical. His object then becomes to evaluate how standardized knowledge is within the community and how diversity is reproduced yet controlled in social life. He means his conclusions to advance our understanding of the reproduction of knowledge generally rather than of the meaning of the Rarámuri conceptions in particular. He argues that in a society such as the Rarámuri in which public forums for the detailed and explicit expression or transfer of knowledge as well as formal controls such as initiation rituals or examinations are generally lacking, the constraints on diversity are two-fold, stemming from the logical relations among the ideas or propositions which constitute the knowledge, and from the practices, such as curing and funerary rituals in which the knowledge is embedded.

This approach is somewhat reminiscent of Evans-Pritchard's classic account of Zande witchcraft (though Merrill might wish to convict E-P of what one could call the homogeneity fallacy). But while E-P was concerned with belief - how can people hold the beliefs that they do - Merrill is concerned with knowledge - how it is that people know what they know, in common or not. Instead of circularity and nonfalsifiability, he addresses flexibility, relative contingency and presupposition. Although Merrill might not agree with this formulation, this shift from belief to knowledge reflects an increased sophistication since E-P's day concerning the conceptualization of culture, particularly through Needham's demonstration that 'belief' is not a self-evident universal category and Geertz's elaboration of the fact (of course prefigured in E-P's emphasis on the social logic of recourse to 'beliefs') that culture is public, non-subjective and worked out in the social realm. Hence it makes sense to shift from an essentially subjective and culture-bound concept like belief to a potentially more objective one like knowledge.

Knowledge is an important concept for anthropological theory at the present time for a number of

reasons, not only because it anchors the shift to a non-subjective view of culture but also because it contributes to the mediation of the symbolic/materialist rift that has been so characteristic until very recently of anthropology "south of the border". Hence it enables us to bring an important material process like reproduction to bear on the ideational realm. For Merrill, it is yet a third function which gives knowledge its primary importance, namely its contribution to breaking down the view of local culture as internally homogenous and to providing a theoretical rather than a merely empirical means for accounting for internal diversity. In other words, it is high time that symbolic anthropologists followed the lead of what Anthony Wallace, speaking of personality, described in his memorable phrase as the shift from "the replication of uniformity to the organization of diversity". Merrill's concern lies precisely with the production and reproduction of diversity.

Because the subject is a timely one and the issues of some significance, and because the book is solid and accessible enough to speak for itself, I would like to continue with a fairly close reading of what I take to be the strengths and weaknesses of the book, indulging just a little in the invidious strategy of describing the book I would have written.

It strikes me that Merrill's main strengths and interests are cognitive or intellectualist. Like a good ethnobotanist, he is concerned initially with eliciting taxonomic domains; Merrill merely substitutes eschatology for botany. To pursue intracultural diversity, he supplemented his participant-observation fieldwork with intensive interviews conducted with two main informants. Although such a formal approach has drawbacks which Merrill recognizes, it was necessitate by the very manner in which religious knowledge is produced and circulated (or not circulated) within the community. In an interesting discussion, he points out that knowledge can be both discursive and non-discursive and that its reproduction occurs through both discursive and non-discursive practices, yet, as might be expected, he focuses mainly on the discursive side. It would have been a significant addition to the book to have included a discussion of the reproduction of such non-discursive knowledge as how to drink or run, practices which seem, from the many references to them, to have great significance. I also wish he had devoted some attention to the question of inequality in the distribution of knowledge. While acknowledging the presence of specialists, especially curers and those who know how to conduct rituals, there is no systematic account of how this advanced knowledge

is acquired, or indeed how different it really is from the knowledge maintained by everybody else. This raises a more basic question, namely the distinction between the informational content of knowledge and the authoritative force it carries. In social life what is important is not simply who knows what, but who claims to know what, how such claims are judged or validated, and what prestige or power such acceptance confers. With the brief exception of the section on sermons (which, he discovers, are more effective as rhetorical devices than as media for the transmission of cosmological knowledge), we learn little about what makes some knowledge authoritative, "real", "true", "interesting", or whatever the appropriate categories of judgement are. The account is thus somewhat de-politicized.

The neglect of specialized practitioners also means that although Merrill emphasizes the importance of practice, his use of practice is actually rather limited, referring essentially to the relatively standardized enactment of rituals as arenas for the reproduction of knowledge. The emphasis is more on whether or not rituals reproduce specific kinds of knowledge than on conflict over "correct" enactment. I would have liked more on how concepts and knowledge are brought forward to deal with particular circumstances, with the ever-changing but always unique concatenation of forces that comprises the experience of everyday life, with how knowledge is relevant for and draws relevance from the specific problems that people face (e.g., not only with the abstract knowledge that souls exist and have such-and-such characteristics, but with the knowledge that X's soul has characteristic A at time B with implication C and contrary to Y's opinion of the matter), and with how formulations arise and change in use. Merrill does provide excellent accounts of specific rituals and a lengthy case study of an illness, but these are actually fairly traditional descriptions of rituals such as one might find in any high quality ethnography.

Merrill presents us with an ethnographic dilemma: how should an anthropologist represent local knowledge when his informants say little without his intervention and who, when they are encouraged to speak, do not agree among themselves? The dilemma, he argues, is in the eye of the beholder, a product of viewing systems of knowledge as static and homogenous, of reifying them. This is an important issue and an important response. But the question is also: how embedded are we in old modes of thinking, of representation? Does Merrill escape his own strictures? In the excellent theoretical sections such as the first and third chapters Merrill argues

that knowledge must be "seen as a process embedded in social life" (p.13), yet is he as reflective as he might be on the way in which the diversity of answers he receives is a product of his practice, his assumptions and lines of questioning? A valuable and impressive feature of this book is that Merrill provides the evidence to let the reader raise such an issue. Moreover, despite an excellent historical chapter, contemporary Rarámuri cosmology appears timeless. Too often he introduces ideas with phrases like "The Rarámuri think that..." or "The Rarámuri are very sensitive to any expression of sadness" (p.96). I cannot offer a better representational strategy, I merely note that this violates his own recognition of polyphony, his impetus to move away from a "rules-and-behavior" approach toward what Lawrence Rosen has called a "repertoire-and-performance" one.

The real measure of Merrill's achievement is that he is able to show how much knowledge underlies the typical and unpromising responses of informants who deny knowing anything special. By providing strategies to get out of this impasse Merrill's account should be useful for anyone working with the apparently inarticulate, whether with the "subordinate discourse" of women or other implicit forms of knowledge. It is for the courage to tackle tacit knowledge and informal practices and the energy to consistently link back marked events like rituals to everyday processes of reproduction that Merrill's work gains its major significance.

Finally, whether traditionally presented or not, we do learn a great deal of interest about the Rarámuri world: the mirror-image conception of relations between the Rarámuri and non-Indians, conceived to be the children of God and of the Devil, respectively; the movement of souls in sleep and illness which resonates with the literature on *susto*. Rarámuri thinking about knowledge is also of interest. Merrill points out that the fact that "the Rarámuri display a unanimity of opinion in public that obscures the diversity of ideas they hold privately... derives not from social pressure for ideological conformity but from the conviction that people should be allowed to think what they want and therefore should not be openly challenged in their thinking by others" (p.9). This view, I suspect, is characteristic of many North American native groups. But in the end, then, does not the local theory of knowledge and practice itself embed the knowledge and practice of theory, and do we not discover that hermeneutic approaches and social practice ones depend for their strengths on each other?

In emphasizing the diversity of knowledge Merrill tends to treat it as a set of facts, logically

interrelated to be sure, but nonetheless essentially referential statements (rather than, for example, metaphors) about souls, dreams, etc. Yet it is questionable whether the Rarámuri view knowledge in the same way, as objectified information. My suspicion is that Merrill has inadvertently shown us what our conception of knowledge is. In a society in which literacy does not appear to be a significant means for knowledge transmission, a more personal, subjectified conception (briefly visible, for example, in the discussion of sorcery or of doctors' dreaming) may be appropriate. Thus knowledge cannot be a simple form of currency, and individual differences are of less concern for the Rarámuri than for the anthropologist's models of reproduction.

In the end I am left with the puzzle: how significant is the diversity of Rarámuri knowledge? Is it the product of solitary reflection in a society that has lost the means for collective thought; is it an expression of personal freedom in a society which sets little store by intellectual conformity; or is it simply the inevitable but relatively insignificant by-product of the general and very significant processes through which reproduction and practice are articulated? Read this engaging and important book and enhance your own knowledge of the subject.

Jane NADEL-KLEIN and Dona Lee DAVIS (eds.), *To Work and To Weep: Women in Fishing Economies*, St. John's, Newfoundland: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1988. 320 pages.

by Charles R. Menzies
York University

It is refreshing to read a collection of papers that concentrates on women in fishing economies. Too often, in the literature on fishing folk, women are relegated to a shadowy role behind their men. The hunt for fish is glorified as a male domain, while women are presented sitting quietly at home, anxiously waiting for their men to return. Nadel-Klein and Davis have done much to dispel this image with their ground-breaking collection on women and fishing.

This collection stems from a symposium organized by Jane Nadel-Klein in conjunction with the 1983 American Anthropological Association meetings in Chicago. It focuses on "the nature and significance of women's roles in communities in which fishing is a primary mode of subsistence" (xi). The