

## Culture



# Raija WARKENTIN, *Our Strength is in our Fields: African Families in Change*, Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1994; 330 pages, \$21.95 US (paper)

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algorithms). They reject as “incoherent” any opposition between innate and acquired traits, but proceed to reproduce it in their distinction between genetically inherited “metaculture” and socially learned “epidemiological culture”. They argue that the “architecture of the mind” is a product of development, yet that it pre-exists as a set of design specifications *underwriting* development. Tooby and Cosmides might be advised, perhaps, to attend to the muddles in their own thinking before preaching to social scientists on the virtues of principled explanation.

Indeed, the editors of this volume launch their manifesto for evolutionary psychology from the deck of a sinking ship which is rapidly becoming swamped by the weight of its own contradictions. More often than not, works that triumphantly announce the emergence of a new era of scientific understanding turn out in retrospect to mark the terminal decline of an old one. In this, I predict, this book will prove to be no exception. However, if the approach it trumpets is rotten at the core — as I, for one, am sure it is — then the onus is on us to show *why* it is so wrong, and to come up with something better. *The Adapted Mind* may be read as a cautionary tale of what can happen if the problem of the evolution of mind is left in the custody of cognitive scientists and neo-Darwinian biologists. For this reason, if no other, social and cultural anthropologists should study it carefully. They cannot afford to make the same mistakes.

Raija WARKENTIN, *Our Strength is in our Fields: African Families in Change*, Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1994; 330 pages, \$21.95 US (paper).

By D. G. Hatt,

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This book is an ethnographic study of people whom the author identifies as the “Fofu” (a fictitious name intended to protect the privacy of people whose lives are revealed in intimate detail) of northeastern Zaïre. It is cast in an avowedly feminist, experimental, dialogical and polyphonic genre, and is focused closely on the personal conflicts and dilemmas of Fofu individuals, mostly, but not exclusively, women. The information on these individuals is set in a matrix of the author’s personal perspective as an often bewildered foreigner living among the Fofu, seeking to understand what was going on around

her. In each episode, we learn how she first encountered these individuals, how she interacted with them, and how her understanding of their situations evolved over repeated episodes of interaction. Much of the information is presented in the individuals’ own words, often embedded in dialogues with the author, who makes no claims to privileged knowledge about either the people or their society. In this sense, the ethnography preserves many of the steps of the author’s own process of discovery. It is, in sum, a striking and very up-to-date example of self-reflexive ethnography, and might, indeed, serve well as a textbook example both of the strengths and weaknesses of that methodology.

The book “reads” in many respects more like a personal narrative than a standard ethnography, and thus should be highly approachable to the non-specialist reader to whom it is addressed. Thanks to the author’s unusually long sojourn among the Fofu, spanning a total of twelve years, we can see three-dimensional persons develop over time, as they absorb hurts and losses, some of them maturing as individuals along the way, and others coming to sad ends. The book’s strength is in its ability to convey, vividly and directly, the texture and tone of the everyday life of ordinary individuals, and in particular, of their confusions and mutual misunderstandings as they cope with their dilemmas and struggle to interpret their existence to themselves and to one another. The author makes no assumption that there is some underlying matrix of cultural meaning shared by the Fofu which she, as a trained specialist, has somehow unlocked or decoded. On the contrary, her individuals are left pretty much to stew in their existential universe of humanly-positing meanings and shifting and contested interpretations.

This brings us to what is, in my view, the work’s principal shortcoming. So great is the author’s commitment to making her subjects’ lives directly intelligible to the reader at the “human” level, and so assiduous her commitment not to exoticise them, that it is difficult to discover much that is either socially or culturally peculiar to the Fofu in the book. The subtext of Warkentin’s ethnography is really that, though the Fofu might live in thatched huts and have polygamous households, and subscribe to rites and ceremonies unfamiliar to us, they are really, as individuals, people very much like ourselves. Such information on Fofu society or religion as is contained in the book is presented in small bits and pieces, scattered throughout the work, mostly as

glosses to particular events. One understands and sympathizes with the author's methodological commitment to avoid imposing analyst's constructs over her informants, but is not her exclusive focus on personal meanings ultimately an analyst's construct of another sort? Perhaps the best example of this is in the dialogues, which are presented in a breezy, idiomatic, English style which retains barely any trace of having been expressed in a language based on thought patterns and ontological assumptions different to European ones (indeed, for all the author's candor in revealing the circumstances of the data collection, the question of what language the dialogues were collected in remains vague).

Warkentin's Fofu appear directly intelligible to the reader because the author has focused exclusively on those elements of personal life which lend themselves to immediate intelligibility. But in so doing, she has placed their social existence so far in the background that the reader has difficulty in discerning the outlines of it. Such a study makes one aware of how much traditional ethnography depicts the forest and not the trees; by going to the opposite extreme, Warkentin has presented a very up-close picture of the trees, but has conveyed little sense of the forest.

George E. MARCUS (ed.), *Perilous States: Conversations on Culture, Politics, and Nation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993; 381 pages, \$18.95 U.S. (paper).

By Brian Freer

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The late 20th century rendezvous of anthropology and cultural studies continues in *Perilous States*, a volume of ethnographic conversations which are framed in terms of a formidable set of concerns regarding the cultural and political implications of the trajectory and reconfiguration of contemporary nation-states, and explored through dialogue at sites ranging from Eastern Europe to Argentina where contributors with previous fieldwork experience return and encounter unprecedented transformations. *Perilous States*, first in a series scheduled to appear annually until 2000, suggests that sojourns and permanent relocations to the "postmodern", exemplified in texts *de rigueur* such as *Writing Culture* (University of California, 1986), need not encumber the development of ethnographic fieldwork styles

and forms of reportage designed to operate reflexively within the flux and emergence of boundaries in the shifting terrain of social and ethnic identities confronting the enterprise of social analysis. Conceptually, the series, *Late Editions: Cultural Studies for the End of the Century*, seeks to examine thematically relevant problematics, anchored in time, by documenting intersections and lacunae of global transformations as experienced through cultural processes.

In the recent anthropological past, "fieldwork" operated as a referential category in discourse relating to the conduct of research. The volume temporarily silences this conceptual referent as it seeks to secure intellectual space within the realm of cultural studies by providing an anthropologically mediated response to overly textualist approaches described by Marcus as "short on access to the diverse situations of its own contemporary global concerns and commitments" (p.2).

The volume asks contributors to participate in "engaged conversations" (p.6) and Grant's account makes fine use of this approach in his dialogue with Russian members of the Union of Writers regarding the reconstruction of Russian nationalisms in the context of a re-emergent imperialism which continues for one writer "because Russia for them is not a place where Russians have lived since the beginning of time, Russia for them is the places that Russia has conquered" (p.48). The pieces by Milun and Coplan on Hungary and South Africa respectively, also explore contemporary perspectives on history, but they do so from the point of view of public performance artists. Both of these accounts offer powerful commentary on art's potential to transform routine modes of political discourse in ways which blur distinctions between subtle criticism and direct action.

The breakup of the Soviet Union is the setting for Baizer's account of the emergent political roles of shamanism in Siberia and Fischer and Grigorian's conversations with Armenian politicians. These contributions offer perceptive ethnographic commentary on contemporary social movements through their sketches of unlikely politicians who have discovered ways of linking the past to the present in scenarios unimaginable a few short years ago. An Armenian politician with a Ph.D. in art history illustrates this predicament by noting "None of us are professionals . . . We are transitional people. In five years the government must be staffed with professionals" (p.115).