

## Culture

# Michael HOUSEMAN and Carlo SEVERI, *Naven ou le donner à voir, Essai d'interprétation de l'action rituelle*, Paris; CNRS Éditions, 1995, FF 135

Eric Schwimmer



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Book Reviews / *Comptes rendus*

Michael HOUSEMAN and Carlo SEVERI, *Naven ou le donner à voir, Essai d'interprétation de l'action rituelle*, Paris; CNRS Éditions, 1995, FF 135.

By Eric Schwimmer

This book deals with a single society, the Iatmul of New Guinea and a single institution, the *naven* ceremony. Although Bateson was the first to analyse the *naven* ceremonies in his classic study of 1936, a great deal more has been discovered about them lately, notably by the Basel school of Anthropology which has produced a series of magnificent field studies of Sepik peoples. Swiss scholars such as B. Hauser-Schäublin, M. Stanek, J. Wassmann and F. Weiss greatly widened our knowledge of rituals of the *naven* type and deepened the analysis of those rituals well beyond what Bateson discovered, both on the level of social structure and of ritual symbolism. Moreover, they drew attention to the theatrical and manipulative aspect of these rituals as well as the way they were transformed in post-contact history.

In fact, the excellence of the Basel school's monographs would have been recognized many years ago but for the sad fact that hardly any Melanesianist scholars have sufficient command of the German language to read them and that these monographs are too specialized and detailed to invite translation. The Houseman/Severi essay is therefore serving a highly useful function in presenting some of the key ideas of these monographs in a language more accessible to anthropologists. If it had confined itself to a critical review of these works, and to showing how they enriched and added further dimensions to Bateson's classic, it would have been possible to give the essay almost nothing but praise (although it seems insensitive to the Basel school's historical and transactional finesse).

Unfortunately, the authors decided to treat this material as the basis of a general theory of ritualised action. Their basic concept is "ritual condensation" (p. 55) which appears to transpose to the field of ritual analysis the kind of mathematical formalization presented in Lévi-Strauss' canonic formula for myths.

The authors are right in noting that Bateson himself did not see how these relations could be mathematized, but R. Wagner, M. Strathern and several others (unmentioned in the essay's bibliography) have taken the novelty out of all these doubly inverted plant and animal parts identified with simulated physiological processes appropriating a kind of pseudo-control over child-birth.

The authors are not melanesianists (one is an anthropologist who did fieldwork in Panama, the other is a comparative sociologist). They have too limited a knowledge of the vast and challenging regional literature and seem unaware of what has already been discovered. There are no particular errors in what they say about ritual condensation, but a lack of novelty and a certain vagueness in restating what M. Strathern has stated more precisely and coherently. Moreover, if the authors had read Strathern, they would have known that the *father* (p. 201) is not a figure absent from *naven* and they could have seen how he fits into their scheme.

In spite of its failure as a new theory of ritualized action, the book is useful to those interested in Iatmul ethnography but unable to read the original texts of the Basel school. Their presentation is skilful and perceptive, and the comparison with Bateson is illuminating.

Youssef, COHEN, *Radicals, Reformers and Reactionaries: The Prisoner's Dilemma and the Collapse of Democracy in Latin America*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

By Catherine Schissel

University of Calgary

Youssef Cohen's *Radicals, Reformers and Reactionaries* is an attempt to explain the rise of authoritarianism in Latin America in the sixties and seventies. Using Brazil and Chile as case studies, Cohen offers a rational-choice interpretation of the events that lead to the overthrow of Presidents Goulart in 1964 and Allende in 1973.