Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia by Morten Axel Pedersen (review)

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The Jaguar and the Priest: An Ethnography of Tzeltal Souls


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This monograph carefully explores the detailed and intimate topographies of the inner self in Cancuc, a Tzeltal-speaking Maya municipality in highland Chiapas, México. It is beautifully written and produced and is clearly a unique and important contribution to Mesoamerican scholarship and beyond. A startling finding from this part of the world is that the soul is not, strictly speaking, a unitary concept. Rather, there are three distinct realms of spiritual identity; multiple and possibly conflicting elements reside within everyone—perhaps in the form of jaguars or priests but in a number of other guises as well. They are shadowed, obscured, and may not necessarily be revealed within one’s lifetime. In these circumstances, self-reflection can be a tricky affair, not to mention understanding others and their mixed motivations. This is a rich and complex inner landscape. By comparison, Western notions of the soul seem undeveloped, even childlike in their simplicity. This is an ethnography of a very special stamp: without maps or diagrams, it offers close descriptions of places that do not exist by any conventional definition. Further, both the material collected in this volume and its analysis challenge the received wisdom of contemporary Maya ritual, creating possibilities for new interpretive perspectives in a field that too often “discovers” what it is looking for and no more.

One can infer that the ethnographic information in this text was extracted from deep and sustained dialogues with a handful of close friends and collaborators. Topics were clearly revisited over time, and “answers” were not always forthcoming. Mayanists will be rewarded with some fascinating surprises: for example, the house is not considered a model of the universe, as faithfully reported elsewhere in the region, but is presumably just a house. Spectacular public rituals, subjected to a great deal of scrutiny and analysis in nearby communities, are likewise said to be almost entirely devoid of meaning. Local processions and ceremonies are presented as carefully performed mimetic remnants of bygone colonial rites, and people were quite disinterested in speculating on the deeper meanings of such matters. Contrariwise, domestic rituals of hearth and home were the subjects of extensive comment and commentary.

One domestic ritual, a curing ceremony, is recorded in detail. As the author points out, despite decades of anthropological research in the region, the texts of curing prayers are understudied and not well understood. This case study aptly demonstrates the complexities of the soul in maintaining good health, as a ritual specialist diagnoses and treats a young man’s grave illness. A curer must first distinguish between simple bodily ailments and a range of illnesses caused by evil-doing entities, generally aspects of other people’s souls on the loose. The three elements of Tzeltal souls are (1) “the bird of the heart,” shared by all people of Cancuc; (2) a miniature, shadowy human form that resides both in the heart and within one of four ancestral mountains; and (3) as many as 13 additional entities, including personnel and objects drawn from across space and time. An abbreviated list includes natural phenomena (such as winds, meteorological phenomena, and lightening bolts) and a variety of wild animals, as well as priests, teachers, evangelical musicians, and an extraordinary collection of hybrid creatures—for example, steel-edged tools with the bodies of water snakes. These reside in the heart and may also roam the earth, at times with deleterious effects on others. An individual’s personality is a result of the innate character of their miniature human entity of the second category and the panoply of entities in the third category, which skip generations through one’s lineage. Because these elemental aspects of the soul are almost entirely drawn from the Spanish colonial past, it is suggested that souls are in fact alien to personhood—indeed, the soul is the symbol and the seat of the “other” within. Following this reasoning, the Tzeltal soul encapsulates history itself.

The historical and ethnohistorical information that links imagery and infuses meaning into Tzeltal soul life is finely interwoven throughout the text, in a sense replicating a local
view of time past—pervasive yet quite imprecise in any strictly linear sense. Local archives reflect the shared power of the written word: for the anthropologist, their content is inserted in a broader narrative, while in the community setting, caches of documents, mostly from the 19th century, exert symbolic power by their mere existence. Even as this monograph takes pains with historical memory, the original Spanish version was based on research carried out some 20 years ago, and it is unfortunate that this translation–revision did not include a postscript to make some account for the past two decades of deep social change in the region. Of course, discovering whether and how this place and its distinctive views of self, causation, and society survive the vicissitudes of time and modernity is a task for future research. But even in the short term, this work has gently toppled the apple cart of conventional anthropological wisdom in the highlands. In a land of intensive studies and restudies, the findings of The Jaguar and the Priest are instructive, salutary, and profound.

Single Reviews

Living the Drama: Community, Conflict, and Culture among Inner-City Boys


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Generations of studies have habitually rendered “urban youth” and “violence” synonymous. This academic preoccupation with marginalized young men, in particular, and violence has created an often- vexed industry of ideas that claim to explain why young people commit violence.

David Harding enters this field attempting to understand how violence affects the everyday lives of young men. He asks, “What is it about poor neighborhoods that matters for the individual adolescents who grow up in them?” He finds that neighborhood context matters, that “violence structures adolescent boys’ safety and their use of space in the city” (p. 25). From his findings, he develops a few concepts that become useful for understanding processes and outcomes relating to poor boys. These include cultural heterogeneity, cross-cohort socialization, and leveling expectations, among others. Although Harding does enter a saturated field that addresses violence among inner-city boys, his contribution is unique and is bound to change the way in which scholars analyze violence and other social phenomenon amid marginalized young men.

Harding’s most important idea is that of cultural heterogeneity. He critiques social isolation theory—the notion that individuals living in concentrated poverty will develop unique subcultures that are compensatory and often oppositional to mainstream culture. He finds that “poor neighborhoods are actually sites of intense cultural conflict rather than dominant deviant subcultures” (p. x). He argues that young people living in poverty have access to conventional cultural models, such as acquiring college educations or becoming responsible fathers, and indeed have aspirations and a limited amount of resources to live up to these models.

Harding explains that although cultural heterogeneity exists in all social environments, the content of the messages within each cultural frame a youngster encounters and the kinds of social support each frame has available in a particular neighborhood context are actually what makes it different in poor settings. So if, for example, a youngster in a poor neighborhood aspires to go to college and his single mother constantly pushes him to do so, his peers on the streets and older siblings may support an alternative frame (i.e., success in this context means not getting arrested and not becoming victimized by violence). Harding explains that standards of achievement are low in poor neighborhoods because of older peers who have encountered negative fates such as dropping out, prison, or victimization. This process he calls “leveling expectations.” Young people reduce their expectations based on competing notions of success in a context where violence is a central preoccupation.

Harding argues that cultural heterogeneity has negative consequences because it is hard to process multiple competing and conflicting cultural models, particularly for adolescents, who struggle to find their own identities . . . the social environment provides a weaker signal about what option is best, because there is social support for many different options. Since there is less consensus or agreement where there is greater heterogeneity, it will be harder for the adolescent to choose between competing options. The result may be weaker commitment to the chosen option and a lower likelihood of follow through. (p. 156)

This process, what Harding refers to as “model shifting,” can have devastating consequences for youngsters because the structural conditions they live in combined with the social support they find for specific cultural models often determine an amplification of cultural models that leads to health-compromising behaviors.

Some questions that this reader is left with have to do with agency: Does cultural heterogeneity always necessarily
result in negative outcomes? What about resilience and young people’s ability to reason through the variety of options at hand? What alternative outcomes exist in the context of cultural heterogeneity? Future studies might grapple with how multiple frames might also prove beneficial under certain conditions.

The implications of Harding’s findings are major. If we are able to provide more social support and not necessarily new cultures of achievement—which already exist in poor settings but are weakened by structural conditions—then we can help young people diminish other dominant cultural frames that lead to detrimental consequences. Our job is to introduce resources that will provide youngsters with the ability to expand certain positive cultural frames; it is not to try to change the internal workings of young people or to teach a hard work ethic because these notions are already embedded in the social fabric of everyday life among poor inner-city youths.

Living the Drama is an exceptional book that will help frame discussions about inner-city boys for years to come. It promises to be useful in discussions among undergraduate and graduate students in classes on urban studies, crime, and youth development.

Gender, Sexuality, and Meaning: Linguistic Practice and Politics


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Some scholars, on retirement, slow down. Others pick up speed. Fortunately, Sally McConnell-Ginet, Professor Emerita, Department of Linguistics at Cornell University, is of the latter, which is why we now have a valuable collection of some of her most poignant articles on gender and language, freshly edited, introduced, and concluded. (It is also why we may be blessed someday with a cookbook dedicated to eggplant.)

Divided into three sections that are buttressed by a prelude and a coda, Gender, Sexuality, and Meaning, as language-and-gender scholar Mary Bucholtz points out in the forward to the compendium, is an introduction to the author’s work on language and gender as much as it is a historical artifact that documents the history of the study of language and gender over the past 30 years. There are other important contributions that this collection of articles makes as well. One is the book’s demonstration of the hard work a dedicated feminist and interdisciplinarian has done over the years to bring to the fore the underlying work of language—in cahoots with its speakers, of course—to perpetuate the status quo of heterosexual male privilege. The second is a call for change and even on occasion a prescription to do so.

The first section, “Politics and Scholarship,” which collects three chapters under its title, evolved from lectures and papers that addressed the intersections of sociolinguistics, anthropology, and feminism with formal linguistics, particularly semantics, and makes a case for the value of bringing disciplines together in pursuit of understanding the full meaning—and action—of words. Some things have changed since those articles were first written but not a whole lot. The field of linguistics is only slightly more open to gender-focused studies, and sociolinguists continue to dominate the subfields of linguistics that do consider gender. McConnell-Ginet’s Ph.D. is in formal linguistics. However, when she began teaching, she immediately realized the value of looking at the gender—language interface to deepen her understanding of meaning, which led to decades of productive collaborations with colleagues in sociology, anthropology, literature, and the literary arts. Eventually, as president of the Linguistic Society of America, she was in a strong position to make a difference. So she did.

Section 2, “Social Practice, Social Meanings, and Selves,” includes articles cowritten with McConnell-Ginet’s longtime friend and collaborator Penny Eckert, who was William Labov’s first graduate student; together they put into interdisciplinary practice what is laid out in section 1. Here there is much discussion of the term communities of practice, coined by two other linguists, to circumscribe the gendered doings of language. “A CoP is any group that interacts regularly around some concern, interest, or activity,” they write, “the members of which hold one another accountable in various ways for their participation in some common social practice(s)” (pp. 90–91, emphasis added). They then go on to unveil the larger social and political settings, including ideologies, to which these CoP are tied. (In 2003, McConnell-Ginet and Eckhart also coauthored a landmark book, Language and Gender, published by Cambridge).

The third section, “Constructing Content in Discourse,” publishes data and analyses by a feminist semanticist influenced by other fields of inquiry. Here you’ll find a call to arms. “Meanings are produced and reproduced within the political structures that condition discourse: though a sexist politics may have helped some men to ‘steal the power
of naming,” the author writes in her chapter, “The Sexual (Re)production of Meaning,” “that power—a real one—can be re-appropriated by feminist women and men building new language communities” (pp. 181–182). In “‘Queering’ Semantics,” the author demonstrates how this has been done with the word queer, and in “Prototypes, Pronouns, and Persons,” she discusses the singular use to which the words they or them are being put. (They or them, if you haven’t noticed already, have evolved into the singular and are well on their way to replacing he and she when a generic reference is desired.) On the they–them issue, McConnell-Ginet uses the singular term themself in her opening chapter as a kind of synthesis.

For anthropologists, the value of this collection lies not only in the research findings, new or old (but by no means dated), which will be of interest to scholars as well as students, but also in having, between two covers, an assembly of scholarly articles that do help to summarize, paradigmatically if not comprehensively, the small—and wildly groundbreaking—field of language and gender.

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Making War in Côte d’Ivoire

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In this engaging, well-informed, and consistently insightful book, Mike McGovern analyzes developments in Côte d’Ivoire (CI) between 2002 and 2007. Despite his title, McGovern’s topic is not war (none occurred in CI during this period) but, rather, various elements of violence, militarization, and international intervention that amounted to “war-making as a process rather than an event” (p. xviii). He eschews any general argument beyond insistence “on a multicausal explanation” but then, in a distinction between anthropology and more economistic or rational-choice approaches, “insists on the importance of bringing all these incentives, motivations and justifications into line with one another” (pp. 24–25).

One of McGovern’s most useful insights is to show how “warring” Ivorian conflicts, usually defined primarily along ethnic-regional lines, are also based on history (precolonial slave trading as well as colonial force and classificatory discourse), intergenerational tensions, and opportunistic criminality extending across national and continental boundaries. He does a nice job of describing the differing cultures of CI’s rich coastal forest regions (decentralized, thinly populated, open to Christian conversion) and the poorer northern savannas (mainly Mande, Muslim, and closely linked to immigrants from surrounding Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinée). He avoids essentializing these identities, in part because he recognizes that the actual politics of the country have tended to operate on what he (perhaps over-) theorizes as “thirdness”—that is, how other elements consistently mitigate such binaries. Thus, tension between the two southern regions has been at least as salient as their supposed common “Ivoirité” in opposition to the Muslim northerners or immigrants. The current government was, in fact, formed through an electoral alliance between leaders of the southeast and north against the incumbent southwestern-based regime of Laurent Gbagbo.

It is less “thirdness” than a combination of political economy and Freudian-cum-Lacanian psychology that informs McGovern’s account of intergenerational conflict, particularly in the southwest, where a once-flourishing cocoa economy was built on the labor of—but also by selling land rights to—migrants from both the north exterior and the west. In contrast to other analysts who have seen this crisis largely in local economic terms, McGovern stresses the disappointment of younger men who had been sent to the capital for education but, in the declining national economy of the 1980s onward, found no white-collar employment there and returned home to discover that their agricultural patrimony was not as lucrative as before and, more critically, in the possession of “foreigners.” Psychology, for McGovern, is necessary to understand the intense and violent nature of the response to this situation, although other observers might find the socioeconomic conditions (incl. university student politics)—which McGovern actually examines more closely—to be sufficient. McGovern also gives considerable attention to the popular culture (particularly music) of this new generation with its often-radical negation of the existing social order but implies that it is still contained within a framework of “play” and “supplication” (a hope for some rewards as the result of protest).

The great father figure of all postcolonial CI is of course its late first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who is both blessed by McGovern for establishing an ultimately untenable regime of export-based patronage in close collaboration with France and praised for producing a legitimate national identity, based on his concern that the material benefits of his power be widely shared. Houphouët was a Baule from the southwest and a man much interested in
Muslim–Christian dialogue as well as economic investment in the north, so it is not surprising that the current ruling party calls itself RHDP (Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix). Meanwhile, it is in the now politically isolated southeast that McGovern sees a continuing breakdown of order, justice, and the conservation of natural resources (linked to parallel developments in neighboring Liberia).

Given the events that occurred between late 2010 and early 2011, which are only partially recounted in McGovern’s “Afterword” (an electoral victory by the RHDP, Gbagbo’s resistance and arrest after an invasion of the capital by dissident military forces from the north with support from UN and French troops), it is perhaps just as well that this book does not provide a more decisive synthesis of the factors promoting and constraining violence in contemporary CI. Readers will still learn a great deal about the breakdown and continuing coherence of a state once seen as a shining “miracle” of economic prosperity and political order and will at least be convinced that only inquiries into history and culture in its various inherited and modern forms can, as McGovern argues, “yield meaningful insights into political decision-making” (p. xix).

Icons of Life: A Cultural History of Human Embryos


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Icons of Life is a powerfully argued, theoretically and methodologically innovative, and impressively researched study of how early-20th-century embryo collectors and embryologists, through their work, created new scientific understandings of human embryological development that became the basis for more broadly shared cultural understandings of the origins of individual human life.

Icons of Life opens with the story of author Lynn Morgan’s encounter with an old collection of bottled embryos discovered in a basement at the women’s college where she teaches. Her own response to this collection, shaped by her immersion in contemporary U.S. cultural politics of abortion, was one of revulsion and incomprehension, mixed with “a complicated sadness … for the scientific practice that reduced so many women’s reproductive experiences to a forgotten assemblage of zoological specimens pickled in formaldehyde” (p. 2). Who collected these embryos and fetuses? From whom? Why? And how did they end up so abandoned?

It is in the spirit of an anthropologist seeking to understand the foreignness of the past, as well as how it ushered in our familiar present, that Morgan has pursued her questions about embryology into archives, laboratories, museums, and collections, as well as through interviews. The result is a truly remarkable book that makes visible the vast (and now quite thoroughly forgotten) social, cultural, scientific, and material work that went into creating contemporary imaginings of pregnancy and the unborn.

In Icons of Life, Morgan argues that embryo collecting formed a critical stage in the establishment of what she calls “the embryological view of development” (p. 10), which so thoroughly undergirds contemporary understandings that it is surprisingly difficult even to recognize it as a view rather than a series of self-evident facts about the world. As Morgan describes it, “the embryological view of development” is premised on four key assumptions: (1) that each human life begins at conception, passes from embryo to baby to human, and this is the only route to becoming a full human being; (2) that all human pregnancies produce human embryos; (3) that embryos are amoral biological entities; and (4) that embryological knowledge is true. As obviously true as they might today seem, none of these four points would have been straightforwardly acceptable in the world out of which the embryo collectors themselves emerged. Indeed, their work of collecting, storing, preserving, dissecting, and studying embryos, circulating them among networks of scientific colleagues, and mobilizing many others to do the same—these could hardly have been carried out by people who accepted today’s understandings of what embryos are and what they mean. That same work, however, also ushered in “the embryological view of development,” thus setting the stage for its own erasure from view. By illuminating this process, Icons of Life succeeds in accomplishing—for human reproduction and in a historical vein—the quintessential anthropological project of “making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar.”

Methodologically, Icons of Life offers an innovative exemplar of how history may be approached with an anthropological sensibility. The book presents telling, and quite heartbreaking, details concerning the lives and circumstances some of the (unnamed) women from whom early embryologists obtained the embryos that became their work objects. The book also speaks more broadly to a number of theoretical debates central to contemporary sociocultural anthropology, thus positioning this study of the history of human embryos squarely at the center of discussions of topics such as the social construction of scientific knowledge, the ethics of research on materials of human origin, the historical intertwining of ideologies of race with those of
gender; the cultural workings of visual representations, and the broad question of how discourses get made. In this regard, *Icons of Life* demonstrates powerfully the potential of feminist research on gender and health to illuminate areas of scholarly inquiry that might, on first consideration, seem quite unrelated to these topics.

No less important, however, this is one of those rare scholarly works that also stands to make a significant contribution to public discussion of the topic it addresses. It is suitable for teaching in advanced undergraduate- or graduate-level courses and will be read with interest and profit not only by anthropologists but also by historians, feminists, and other educated readers seeking fresh insight into contemporary issues. *Icons of Life* is a model of clear and engaging scholarly writing that is deeply informed by the most serious high-level discussions in contemporary social theory but that at the same time remains very accessible. Morgan’s voice as an author is even toned and restrained, yet her lively sense of humor, as well as her slow-burning anger at the injustices that her research reveals, remain discernible beneath her understated text. This book addresses professional anthropologists on topics that concern them and in a way that they will recognize as subtle and interesting, but it does so without turning its back on readers who are not immersed in our scholarly community and its jargon. *Icons of Life* is a remarkable work that seems destined to have a significant impact both within and well beyond anthropology.

Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia


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*Not Quite Shamans* is a welcome contribution to the literature on the occult and supernatural, shamanism, postsocialism, and Mongolia. Morten Axel Pedersen conducted his fieldwork in northern Mongolia—in Shishged Depression among Darhads, who are famous, at least in Mongolia, for having the most “authentic” shamans. When Pedersen arrived to conduct his research in late 1990s and early 2000s, however, he found a paradox: the homeland of shamanism, where shamans persevered even through the harshest persecution during socialism, was now barren. Instead of shamans, the place was full of хоо шиг or хөөрхүү individuals (shaman-like or sort-of-a-shaman—but-not-quite). These are almost exclusively young men who ought to be shamans but are unable to become them because of lack of teachers (i.e., “authentic” and accessible shamans in the area) and insufficient resources, among other things, to obtain shamanic paraphernalia that are necessary for appeasing and controlling the spirits—the traits of trained shamans. And, thus, they suffer attacks by spirits. These men’s propensity to drinking and staging асган (a violent outbursts of anger, uncontrolled body movements like kicking the stove, and bursts of inappropriate language) and other disruptive behaviors are seen as the outcome of their exposure to spirits—the multiple external agencies—which make them “individuals” rather than individuals, and for that they are mad, troublesome, and misfortunate. Without teachers and shamanic costumes, these men are stuck in a perpetual state of being incomplete shamans. Some of them are also атааманы—the informal big men who reside over local gangs and maintain their power over the community through terror. By all means, these are the Other to the rest.

Pedersen illustrates how the daily lives of Darhads are affected by these not-quite-shamans. His main argument is that the lack of shamans does not make the Darhad life any less shamanic. Quite the contrary, without shamans, shamanism (loosely defined as the constellation of various occult practices, imaginaries, and discourses) thrives and seeps through every pore of the moral, cultural, and natural lives in Shishged. Indeed, Pedersen’s next set of arguments is about the propensity of the postsocialist transformation to be shamanic and about how postsocialist political events create conditions that incline people to take a shamanic perspective. For instance, following a local teachers’ strike in late 1990s and other related political events, the Shishged community seemed to go have gone through a collective right of passage. Those events loosened up the stable and predictable structure of socialism by having people to become a part of the instability, multiplicity, and unexpected transformations (i.e., good wives going on a drinking spree), which opened the possibility for everyone to become a potential shaman. Life without shamans, as author states, is just as shamanic—or even more so—as a place with real shamans, the nearest “center” of which is located more than 100 kilometers to the north.

To illustrate these and other points, different chapters of the book examine examples of unconventional shamanic realms. Pedersen calls them “difficult forms,” as they are in constant flux, ambivalent, and multiple. For instance, the state with its signs of failed socialist modernity and current political instability is shamanic. Even the locals’ way of decorating their houses with the portraits and posters of electoral candidates resemble a vertical succession of shamanic...
spiritual pantheon or skys (tengri). That is, unlike the socialist state that was seen as a single and stable entity, the postsocialist one is multiple, fluid, and divisive, which resembles the not-quite-shamans who are governed by their shifting agencies of agsan and sobriety. Even during non-agsan, they cannot be trusted because they do not fit in the expected norms of age, gender, and social hierarchy. Their notorious jokes, sarcasm, “lies,” and their bodily dispositions—hööłgööntei (moving a lot), öt shig (wormlike), and golgyu (without center)—make most people uneasy and doubtful about their personhood. There is a clear analogy between the not-quite-shamans and the Mongolian postsocialist state. Ridden with internal conflict, constantly changing its composition through elections, and unable to build a coalition (center) to do its job, the postsocialist state has been in a permanent state of incompleteness and incompetency.

Many anthropologists of modernity, postcolonialism, and postsocialism will find exciting and useful conversations and ideas in this book. For instance, Pedersen shows that the Darhads already have their Other, the not-quite-shamans, and do not necessarily need an outsider to construct that category. In that sense, shamanism-without-shamans is not just a metaphor for transformation but, rather, is a condition on its own right and “an indigenous theory of societal transition, and the most recent actualization of transition as a virtual ontological state” (p. 223). For scholars of shamanism, Pedersen, by demonstrating that it is not always the shamans who carry the practice to the new generations but the entire community, reveals some nuances behind shamanic resiliency around the world, despite all sorts of suppressions by states, Buddhism, Christianity, and other powers. The less that shamanism is bound to individual shamans, the farther it spreads out and more fiercely it pushes the boundaries of what Pedersen (p. 211) refers to the “fixity of meanings” in Michael Taussig’s (1987:412) phrasing. (Pedersen’s idea compliments my own work on Buryat Mongolians, in which I illustrate the role of remembering and forgetting and gender [Buyandelger in press] in shamanic proliferation after socialist disruption and argue that it is the community that makes and unmakes the shamans [Buyandelgeriyn 1999].) Finally, the book successfully takes shamanism away from the notion of exotic and traditional but shows its modernities and many ways in which shamanism “spills over [its] forms,” quintessential and even modern and incomplete.

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Political Ecologies of Cattle Ranching in Northern Mexico: Private Revolutions


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Anthropology and related disciplines share a long-standing focus on pastoralism: its protagonists, histories, economics, ecologies, social organization, and culture. A range of contemporary problems—deforestation, erosion, aquifer depletion, and loss of biodiversity and food sovereignty, to name a few—have been attributed to the ceaseless expansion of cattle and meat and dairy production. Eric Perramond’s Political Ecologies of Cattle Ranching in Northern Mexico provides a well-rounded field study of many of the key issues associated with this livelihood in the semiarid highlands of the Sonora River.

Perramond treads an ambitious, winding, and holistic trail in this book and is largely successful in driving home an array of arguments. The introduction to the book presents a trio of concerns that are dealt with throughout the entire text: (1) the evolution of ranching and the constitution of ranchers as a social category, (2) work and management, and (3) ecology and natural resources. In all of these areas, the author insists on depicting the complexity, diversity, and specificity of ranching in highland Sonora with a keen ethnographic eye focused during more than a year of fieldwork. The ethnography is the basis for a number of critiques of the literature on land tenure, social class, range management, and ecology, all of which point out the tendency of scholars toward oversimplification and reductionism.

Property—particularly the distinction between private and public ownership of ranch lands—is perhaps the central guiding thread in the book. Perramond shows how the literature on land tenure, ranching, and management
is premised on a firm, yet erroneous, distinction between private lands and public lands. In Mexico, these land-tenure categories form part of a centuries-long struggle to control the resource, and they are cast in opposition. “Public” and “private,” then, are massively overdetermined concepts that have been operationalized in countless different social and ecological settings in which individual ranchers often control both kinds of lands. Perramond is particularly eager to dispel the stereotypes that have been used in the struggle to nationalize and appropriate lands. Apart from the very biggest ranchers, he tells us, there are no fat cats in the ranching business, and most ranchers in this book appear as harried rural small businessmen. The fact that almost everyone in northern Sonora still aspires to be a rancher, even when it is such a precarious livelihood, allows Perramond to make a sustained argument for the importance of culture in economic and ecological research.

The book contains an introduction, a conclusion, and five substantive chapters. In chapter 2, Perramond provides historical depth to questions of land tenure and ranching in Sonora and a comparative sensibility that will appeal to scholars interested in pastoralism. Chapter 3 is a discussion of production, work, infrastructure, and the management of land cover, water, and soils. Chapter 4 shows an impressive command of the scientific aspects of range landscape and ecology but also concludes that relations of power are a crucial and often-overlooked aspect of these dynamics. Chapter 5 provides a welcome and very interesting discussion of the role of gender and women in the reproduction of ranch households and society and also touches on the transnational dimensions of household economies. Chapter 6 discusses the ongoing dynamic between private and communal property in a ranching economy faced with drought, debt, neoliberal reforms, free trade, conservation, industrialization, and suburban growth. In the conclusion, Perramond reiterates the importance of complexity and diversity in the economies and ecologies of ranching in the Mexican borderlands. He also provides a list of policy suggestions: an interesting and responsible move that distills his findings and reflects the deep local knowledge of ranchers in the region, as well as their desire for concrete recommendations from the academic sector. Here and elsewhere in the book, we see Perramond’s commitment to the people and land of northern Sonora.

The book corrals an impressively holistic combination of historical, quantitative, and qualitative field research. Perramond accompanies the variety of data with an equally diverse set of theoretical tools and authors. Latin names of plants jostle for space with terms such as tactics, strategy, discourse, agricultural hegemony, secret geographies, long-wave fluctuations; long quotes in the local vernacular are juxtaposed with charts depicting the results of surveys of household labor allocation. With such varied data and so many kinds of arguments in play, however, this reader longed for a bit of the narrative stability of the overarching theoretical frameworks that are so ably critiqued in the book. In many ways, the author’s approach mirrors the political culture of northern Mexico’s private ranchers discussed in the book: the distrust of expert knowledge, a sort of authorial individualism, a wariness of collective (political-intellectual) projects. This makes for a rich and insightful text, but at times it seems that Perramond is herding conceptual cats that could be corralled more effectively in the article format. Regardless of this very minor quibble, the book is a fine introduction to ranching in Sonora, and to northern Mexico in general. It would make a truly valuable text for any course on the Mexico–U.S. borderlands or on ranching, land, and labor in Latin America.