

## Culture



**Richard B. LEE, *The Dobe !Kung*, New York, Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Case Studies in Anthropology, 1984. 173 pages, \$12.80 (paper)**

Jean-Claude Muller

Volume 4, Number 1, 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078325ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078325ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

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

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Muller, J.-C. (1984). Review of [Richard B. LEE, *The Dobe !Kung*, New York, Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Case Studies in Anthropology, 1984. 173 pages, \$12.80 (paper)]. *Culture*, 4(1), 82–83. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078325ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1984

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**Érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

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

La clé aux gens du phare, et l'astre  
roué vif sur la pierre du seuil (St-John Perse, *Exil I*)

dans ces parages

du vague  
en quoi toute réalité se dissout

EXCEPTÉ

à l'altitude

PEUT-ÊTRE

aussi loin qu'un endroit fusionne avec au-delà  
(Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés*)

---

Richard B. LEE, *The Dobe !Kung*, New York, Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Case Studies in Anthropology, 1984. 173 pages, \$12.80 (paper).

By Jean-Claude Muller  
Université de Montréal

This is a welcome addition to the famous teaching collection called Case Studies in Anthropology. I bet that every undergraduate student on the North American continent has seen one of several films on the !Kung shot by the Marshalls during the past thirty years. But I also bet that the same students have probably read less on the !Kung than they have seen, this due to the high cost of the specialized books that have recently appeared on several !Kung groups, including Lee's previous contributions.

The !Kung live in the Kalahari desert across the borders of Namibia, Angola and Botswana. Lee has mostly worked—at least when he started fieldwork twenty years ago—among one of the least acculturated groups, the Dobe of Botswana, who are now one of the best known foraging peoples, thanks to Lee, DeVore and a score of other researchers. This book succeeds in bringing their research efforts into a small, dense and intelligible compass. Lee writes well and concisely, avoiding the platitudes that too often plague anthropologists' attempts at "passing the message" to a nonspecialist audience. This proves that it is possible to write for an undergraduate public, and still interest the specialist.

How to successfully realize such a trick? Lee was the first White to live with the Dobe; although they had seen other Whites, none of them had explicitly asked the Dobe to allow them to live in their midst. Right in the first pages of the book, Lee

recalls that when he encountered his first Dobe camp, they criticized him straight away for not having come sooner. They had heard of the Marshalls living among the neighboring Nyae Nyae and were also expecting to get a White man of their own... Blessed such an anthropologist... But what exactly was this invitation for? The Dobe bluntly asserted that what they expected was numerous gifts, as they heard the Marshalls had liberally given out to the Nyae Nyae. This first encounter enables Lee to present the Dobe people and their environment. The first thing the Dobe asked Lee was, the next morning, to transport them in his truck to a place where many mongongo nuts could be harvested. This trip—very hilarious—introduces the chapter on subsistence and technology.

Another anecdote, puzzling to Lee, opens a discussion on kinship and how Lee sorted out the three very intricate kinship paradigms which the Dobe use. Principle one and two seem at first to contradict one another, but they are played out and regulated by a third principle permitting the system as a whole to operate. I would have liked one or two actual cases as examples of this principle put into action; this section should have been a bit more developed since it not always easy to grasp the structural rules and their concrete application, but this is a minor criticism. A discussion on marriage and sexuality follows, also written with gusto.

The next chapter is devoted to conflicts, politics and exchange. The !Kung at large have been depicted and are still generally well known as "the harmless people", from the title of a celebrated book by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (1959). Lee shows very well that this is not quite the case. Fighting and even murder occur; Lee provides statistics and precise cases. But it is not institutionalized violence like that described and analyzed by Clastres or Chagnon among some South American Indians. Lee regrets that Chagnon depicts his fierce people, the Yanomamö, as "our contemporary ancestors"; the Dobe can reasonably have the same claim, but they do not view violence in the same way. This book, because of its format, prevents a long discussion on this point, but I would urge Lee to compare at length the Dobe—and the !Kung at large—with the writings of Chagnon and Clastres on violence, and publish his comparative findings in a separate article. The absence of headman is tackled next, and how people cope with this situation in terms of conflict—usually flights for a while to nearby relatives or exchange partners from other Dobe groups.

Chapter eight gives an account of religious beliefs, world view—the spirits, the ancestors, God,

etc., and how the Dobe use them in their famous medical practices, the collective healing trance so well filmed by the Marshalls.

The last part of the book turns to the relations of the Dobe with their encroaching neighbors, the pastoralists *cum* agriculturalists, Herero and Tswana, who have increasingly penetrated !Kung territory, bringing change in the ecology and in interethnic relations. The Dobe are changing; intermarriage takes place but always in one direction, !Kung women marrying Blacks but never the reverse, since !Kung are seen as inferiors. There are vivid descriptions of the Dobe views on social change, on the White man and his world, on temporary—or long term—work for the Blacks in cattle kraals. Lee explains, with vivid examples, the conflicts experienced by some Dobe who had wanted to copy the Blacks, but who still were tied to their relatives in such a way that their endeavours at “modernization” (such as undertaking agriculture) could not succeed. Migrant work and government intervention—schooling, land reform—are also explained, together with the dilemmas associated with them, but Lee is very careful not to enter into value judgements and leaves the reader to ponder over the changes—for better or for worse?—, an answer the !Kung themselves cannot provide....

However, Lee is more blunt in a postscript on the !Kung in Namibia who have been “resettled” and engaged in numbers in the South African Army to fight the S.W.A.P.O. Drunkenness is alarming and fights and murders are sharply on the rise. The !Kung of Botswana are certainly in better shape. They had a longer time span to adjust to new conditions, and there is no war raging in their country, but the future of the Dobe remains problematic. Lee has seen the change over twenty years of fieldwork. He regularly visited the area and saw the change in motion, so to speak. This is quite different from what has been done previously—at least by Americans—i.e., the anthropologist doing his one year of fieldwork and returning twenty years later to do a re-study. Here, we are able to measure all the steps, all the stages affecting the same individuals, who speak their minds throughout the book.

The greatest compliment we can make to Lee is that he has used his own experiences and adventures among the Dobe to elicit discussion with *them* about these. Throughout the book, one gets the feeling that a professional anthropologist is discussing anthropology with the group he is studying, the Dobe as much making Lee’s ethnography as he

does theirs. This is a frank and open dialogue across cultures.

This excellent book ends with a critical filmography, telling where to get the films, and a selected bibliography in which the most important works are singled out. A beautiful introductory book from start to finish.

---

Michael LAMBEK, *Human Spirits. A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981. 219 pages, US \$13.95 (paper), US \$32.50 (cloth).

By Chester E. Gabriel  
McGill University

This book provides us with a richness both in descriptive detail and in theoretical insights. The author himself points out that in general most treatments of spirit possession have tended to concentrate “on explanation, in terms of function or cause, to the neglect of meaning” (p. 5). This work is concerned with meaning and the stated primary goal is interpretation or explication: “the goal is to reduce the strangeness of other people’s symbolic construction without thereby sacrificing their richness and complexity” (p. 4). The basic premise of the work is that trance behaviour must be viewed not as something unconnected and deviant, but as a cultural system. Literature from the world over points to the remarkable frequency of the possession trance phenomenon. Lambek posits that these findings may even suggest that the potential for trance is normal in humans. The key point, however, is that “the appropriateness of its manifestation is frequently a matter of cultural definition” (p. 6). Within societies in general (in this case Mayotte) there are cultural patterns that form and generate the trance behaviour in the first place. But there is another construct, or perhaps, another level involved. The author points out that if humans in their ordinary state of consciousness operate under these cultural models, then once the individual is in trance and conscious memory is blocked, and hence, usual culture patterns, then this culture must be replaced with a special “trance culture” (p. 6). These “trance cultures” can vary widely just as do the particular societal cultures of which they are a part. This work attempts to capture “trance culture” on Mayotte, the southernmost island of the Comoro archipelago located in