

## Culture

**Jose HAVET, *The Diffusion of Power: Rural Elites in a Bolivian Province*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1985. \$18.00 (paper)**

Tanya Korovkin



Volume 8, Number 1, 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078807ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078807ar>

[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

Korovkin, T. (1988). Review of [Jose HAVET, *The Diffusion of Power: Rural Elites in a Bolivian Province*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1985. \$18.00 (paper)]. *Culture*, 8(1), 102–104. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078807ar>

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

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/>

Fortunately, the calamitous decline in population due largely to a venereal disease, has been arrested and the Toda today show a modest increase in numbers (to about 1,100 in 1975, up from a low of 484 in 1949). Much of this recovery is due to the efforts of a single Christian Toda, Evam Piljain-Wiedemann, whom Walker calls "truly the Florence Nightingale of the Toda" (p. x). Trained as a nurse in England and India, Evam initially offered her services without pay to staff a mobile medical unit in 1953. Her success was dramatic and the use of penicillin both reduced the overall death rate and increased fertility. This mobile unit, now staffed in part by Evam's sister is still vital to the health of the Toda.

Christian missionaries have long been active among the Toda and today there exists two distinct Toda communities, the traditional Hindu-influenced and the Christian, now numbering some 200 individuals. The persistence of ritual and language have been key to the preservation of tradition but in rejecting the sanctity of the dairies the Christian converts divorced themselves from the fundamentals of Toda culture. Toda language, too, has gone, largely due to the need of marrying outside the tiny Christian Toda community to other Christianized individuals of diverse background, such as Badaga, Malayalee and Tamil. The language of such marriages has invariably been Tamil, the *lingua franca* of the hills. Today few Toda Christians even understand the Toda language.

The relationship of the Toda with other Nilgiri peoples has changed since Rivers' day with the introduction of a cash economy and the political incorporation of the Toda in wider district, state and federal institutions. Ritually, the orientation of the Toda is increasingly towards incorporation within the overarching framework of South Indian Hinduism. The Kota no longer provide music at Toda funerals (Hinduised bands are hired instead) but they still provide some Toda with their cooking pots. The Kurumba are still feared for their magic and sorcery and they are frequently employed to combat sickness (alongside the modern clinic).

What then does the future hold for the Toda? As fewer and fewer herd buffalo, Walker envisions a time, perhaps not far distant, when the few remaining buffalo will be kept solely for ritual purposes. Beyond that, there may be a slow withering away of the dairy cult, a process which has already begun. If the dairy cult wanes, there will surely be a further

curtailment of other traditional rituals, such as has already happened to pregnancy, birth and funeral rites, and a slow redefinition of these along more Hindu lines.

In sum, "The Toda of South India" is a valuable supplement to Rivers' classic text. It shows an intimate familiarity with many aspects of Toda life and the author claims a number of Toda among his dearest friends. Yet the work is formal in presentation and one cannot help feeling an opportunity has been lost to convey more of the feeling of what it is to be a Toda today.

---

Jose HAVET, *The Diffusion of Power: Rural Elites in a Bolivian Province*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1985. \$18.00 (paper).

By Tanya Korovkin  
University of Waterloo

In the 1950's and 1960's the Latin American countryside underwent a profound change. Under a combined effect a technological modernization and agrarian reform the large manorial estates typical of the Andean region started to give place to smaller capitalist and peasant production units. The new social order was characterized by flagrant inequalities and widespread poverty. Nevertheless, it tended to be more stable than the manorial society which had given rise to vigorous peasant movements. What factors account for this greater stability?

Havet poses this question with regard to Bolivian experiences before and after the agrarian reform implemented in the wake of the 1952 revolution. His study focuses on changes in the relations of power in the province of Belisario Boeto which is located on the Eastern slope of the Bolivian Andes. Havet argues that the reform did not substantially improve the situation of the peasants who remained exploited and dominated by local elites. The nature of the latter and their relations with the peasants, however, changed considerably. The traditional landed elites gave place to a variety of new elites with diverse power bases and who employed "more sophisticated and less obvious techniques of control" (p. 6). The result was a diffusion of power previously concentrated in the hands of a small group of landlords, which in turn implied a greater social stability.

In analyzing Belisario Boeto's experiences, Havet uses a combination of the elite-mass, conflict and functionalist approaches (outlined in Chapter 1). His functionalism is, in his own words, "Marxian functionalism" compatible with the notions of conflict and domination. He argues, however, that conflict and domination in post-revolutionary rural Bolivia are better understood not in terms of class relations, but rather in terms of the relations between elites and masses since the agrarian reform has decreased the importance of "economic variables" (e.g. control of land), and increased that of organization and information as bases of power (p. 9).

The following chapters deal with the Bolivian experience as such. After a brief discussion of major national trends (Chapter 2), Havet provides a detailed analysis of socio-economic and political changes in Belisario Boeto. Chapter 3 deals with the general characteristics of the province. It describes the relations between landed elites and peasants before the 1952 revolution, the process of agrarian reform and the subsequent rise of new rural elites. According to Havet, the latter fall into four categories: the specialists (doctors, dentists, agricultural technicians, etc.); the political elites (alcalde, subprefect, priest, peasant union leaders); the economic elites (truckowners and shopkeepers; and, finally, the big landholders spared by the agrarian reform.

Chapter 4 examines in greater detail the relations between post-revolutionary elites and peasants. It begins with an analysis of the peasants' isolation from political institutions, an isolation rooted presumably in their "economic autarchy" (a questionable proposition since Havet himself points out that approximately half of the peasant families in the province commercialize more than one-fourth of their production and that an increasing number of them rely on the market for purchases of food and indispensable consumer goods, pp. 69, 72.). The institutional isolation transforms peasants into "passive subjects of politics" (p. 91) easily dominated by elites. The forms of domination, however, may vary depending on the elites' power base. In this connection, Havet makes a distinction between the indirect domination which refers to the use of public funds by political elites in their own interests or in the interests of other elite groups, and the direct domination defined rather vaguely as "a siphoning off and exaction of some type [which] is made on the peasants for the exclusive profit of the elites" (p. 91). The direct domination includes graft (described rather appropriately as "an informal system of taxa-

tion", p. 95) which is practiced primarily by political elites and specialists. It also includes work obligations imposed on peasants by big landholders and the quasi-monopolistic control of prices established by shopkeepers and truckowners. While each elite group develops its own distinctive methods of domination, they all Havet calls "the cooperative of exploitation" expressing their common interest in the preservation of the status-quo. Thus, the dispersion of power among various elite categories is accompanied by the elite cooperation in advancing their common interests and this accounts largely for the remarkable social stability characteristic of the province in the aftermath of the 1952 revolution. In other words, the revolution has made rural power arrangements more "functional" to the operation of the social system without eliminating its exploitive character.

Havet's study contains powerful insights into the nature of social change in the Bolivian countryside. The idea of the diffusion of power provides an important clue to the understanding of rural politics after the decline of manorial society. The reader, however, would like to know more about the exact nature and implications of this diffusion. Do all categories of new rural elites have the same relative weight or do any of them hold more power than the others? To put it differently, who controls "the cooperative of exploitation"? It seems unlikely that doctors and dentists have the same importance in terms of power relations as do the political elites or big landholders. Moreover, it is not entirely clear whether the political elites have succeeded in displacing the big landholders from political and administrative control of the province, as Havet seems to suggest. If not, then the diffusion of power after the revolution may have a much more limited character than Havet's study suggests. On the other hand, the incorporation of peasant union leaders into the category of political elites may have ambivalent implications for the stability of the new social order. In Belisario Boeto they have been clearly coopted by the more powerful and skillful members of "the cooperative of exploitation". However, it seems plausible to suggest that under different historical circumstances they may strike a dissonant note in "the cooperative's" choir.

To conclude, Havet's book is a valuable contribution to the research on local power and rural politics. It raises important theoretical questions and it contains a considerable amount of interesting factual material. In addition, it is written in a vivid and

provocative manner which is likely to trigger a lively discussion in class.

---

Alison KAHN, *Listen While I Tell you. A Story of the Jews of St-John's, Newfoundland*. St-Jean, TN, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1987, 202 p.

Par Pierre Ancil  
Université McGill

L'ouvrage de Alison Kahn s'ouvre en 1981, alors que l'auteur entreprend patiemment une ethnographie de la communauté juive de St-Jean, à Terre-Neuve. J'ai bien dit ethnographie, et non pas histoire, car pour parvenir à ses fins Alison Kahn se met à l'écoute de toutes les personnes associées de près ou de loin à la fondation et au développement d'une petite collectivité de quelques centaines de personnes, établie à l'extrême limite géographique du continent. *Listen While I Tell You* prend donc la forme d'une vingtaine de récits de vie, constitués de manière systématique et retraçant sur un mode concentrique familles, cercles d'amis et partenaires commerciaux, jusqu'à ce que les principaux acteurs aient été entendus et la trame de leur vécu rendue. L'ouvrage a l'avantage, sur bien des livres de ce genre, d'être très bien écrit. L'auteur a entre autres le don de bien décrire l'atmosphère affective dans laquelle s'est déroulée chaque entrevue, les conditions matérielles et sociales des informateurs et leur attitude face à l'intrus qu'est le chercheur. Le plaisir de la lecture et la minutie de l'écriture se doublent d'une présentation graphique très soignée, ce qui rend la consultation de l'ouvrage très agréable et donne vie au sujet.

Un des points forts de *Listen While I Tell You* reste la façon dont Alison Kahn aborde son sujet sur le plan méthodologique, dévoilant ainsi la fragilité du lien qui unit le chercheur avec son champ d'enquête, soit ici une culture spécifique dans un environnement physique et historique très précis. Alison Kahn est juive, tout comme ses interlocuteurs de St-Jean, mais entre elle et eux se dressent des obstacles identitaires importants dont elle devra très vite prendre conscience, et qui en fin de compte finiront par articuler sa compréhension de la communauté juive terre-neuvienne. Tant que le chercheur n'a pas retourné contre lui, en se confrontant à elles, les données qu'il recueille sur le terrain, le progrès de son entreprise peut s'avérer lent et aléatoire. Voyons de plus près. Alison Kahn ai-je dit est juive, mais elle

est le produit d'un judaïsme typiquement nord-américain, libéral sur le plan doctrinaire, axé sur l'individu et son épanouissement personnel et surtout fort bien adapté aux circonstances de la vie moderne telle que l'entendent les Américains. Ses vis-à-vis de St-Jean, dont la mémoire remonte jusqu'au début du siècle et aux premières vagues migratoires juives à atteindre la région, appartiennent au courant strictement orthodoxe du judaïsme ou du moins le prétendent, conçoivent tout en fonction d'une certaine vie communautaire et ne sont généralement très à l'aise ni avec la vie des grandes villes ni avec la langue anglaise. Confrontée à la différence d'accent dans le judaïsme, Alison Kahn finit par débusquer les lignes de forces de la petite collectivité juive de Terre-Neuve, les ruptures idéologiques et religieuses servant de point de repère dans un concert d'entrevues où les événements et les noms de personnes s'enchevêtrent dans un écheveau d'informations parfois disparates.

Et que ressort-il de la parole donnée aux informateurs? Que dès les premiers jours jusqu'à aujourd'hui, les Juifs de St-Jean ont été préoccupés, voire obsédés de l'existence et de la perpétuation des liens communautaires entre individus, familles et entreprises commerciales juives. Y a-t-il une communauté d'intérêts, un faisceau de préoccupations qui unit les Juifs, dans ce cas-ci ceux de Terre-Neuve, ou sont-ils condamnés à disperser dans cette nouvelle diaspora leurs acquis institutionnels et culturels? Chaque personne interviewée se pose la question. Les Juifs terre-neuviens d'autre part ont-ils respecté le judaïsme comme ensemble de préceptes et de prescriptions légales; ont-ils pu consommer des aliments cachères, faire vivre un rabbin de manière convenable, assurer l'éducation religieuse de leurs enfants? Quel fut le degré de compétence halachique des fonctionnaires religieux de la communauté, comme le *shokhet*, l'abatteur rituel, ou le *khazan*, qui dirige la prière chantée à la synagogue? À ces deux questions, qui sont en fait deux faces d'une même réalité ethnographique, les informateurs répondent quasi à l'unanimité par la négative. Sur un autre plan, il ressort très clairement des entrevues que les Juifs de Terre-Neuve, du moins ceux associés aux premières familles ou arrivés avant les années cinquante, ont survécu économiquement grâce aux activités associées au commerce de détail et à l'importation sur une petite échelle de "marchandises sèches", vêtements, quincaillerie et ameublement. En fait, pendant une longue période, au sein d'une économie axée vers la pêche saisonnière et l'agriculture marginale, et où les agglomérations sont petites et isolées, la plupart