

## Culture



# Gilbert H. HERDT, *Guardians of the Flutes*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. 382 pages, US \$14.00 (paper)

J. R. Rayfield

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Despite its many flaws and pretensions, it is a serious, scholarly and sustained attempt to examine one aspect of biology's contribution to the study of human aggression. They very ambitiously try to "account for violence within the framework of a well-founded general theory of human nature...Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection" (p. 2). They argue that the "ultimate objective of our conspicuously purposive physiology and psychology is not longevity or pleasure or self-actualization or health or wealth or peace of mind. It is fitness," (p. 10) defined in the Darwinian sense of survival. Thus "perceptions of self-interest," rooted in the adaptation of the human organism over many thousands of years of evolution, lie at the centre of all conflict, including homicide.

They have an important point to make, that aggressive responses may be more deeply rooted in the human repertoire than we have hitherto acknowledged. They also ask a number of important questions. For example, they ask why is one of the most frequent provocations for homicide - historically and cross-culturally - a "personal conflict or altercation (insult, curse, jostling)" between males? Moreover, how has our understanding of homicide been diminished by social science's failure to distinguish spouse killings from killings of blood relatives - lumping them all together unhelpfully as "family killings", and thus ignoring the profound differences between them? Moreover, they assemble an enormous range of anthropological, sociological and biological data to substantiate some of their points.

It is significant that biologists and biochemists rarely comment on human behavior. Typically, they conclude that humans are too complex to reduce to simple formulae, and they leave the biologizing to recycled psychologists and anthropologists like Daly and Wilson. This is most unfortunate, for many social scientists are now well aware of the fact that no full understanding of the human condition can emerge until we have a truly multi-disciplinary approach which incorporates the insights of all of 20th century science. Still, Daly and Wilson have nudged us a little further along this path.

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Gilbert H. HERDT, *Guardians of the Flutes*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. 382 pages, US \$14.00 (paper).

By J.R. Rayfield  
York University

Many years ago Pedro Carrasco remarked to a third-year class in one of those round-the-world-in-eighty-days ethnography courses, "As an anthropologist I really ought not to say this, but the people of New Guinea are the *queerest* people." In whatever sense Carrasco used the word, the flute-guarding Sambia must surely be the queerest of the queer.

Reo Fortune, also indiscreet, remarks in the introduction to the paperback edition of *Sorcerers of Dobu* that when preparing this edition he felt that the Dobu could not really be as horrible as he had described them in the original book. But on re-reading his earlier work he had to admit that they were. Similarly, though he had done further fieldwork in the interval, Herdt finds no reason to change his views on the Sambia since the first edition of *Guardians of the Flutes* was written in 1978.

The book was intended as a contribution to that field of anthropology which used to be called "culture and personality". That term is now old-fashioned, but the field continues to be explored under more sophisticated rubrics; it is still essentially the study of the interaction between the individual and his culture, of how symbolic systems work and are constantly re-created and reinterpreted both by members of the culture and by anthropologists. For this purpose it is appropriate to study a culture whose customs are bizarre by the anthropologist's standards, so that his sensibilities are not dulled by the taken-for-granted quality of his own and similar cultures.

Like Gregory Bateson, Herdt focuses his study on what he and apparently the Sambia themselves regard as the central and most meaningful activity of their culture, an initiatory cult:

Why should an anthropologist select this focus on sex and gender? What warrants this interest when so many other aspects of a ritual cult want attention? The reasons follow from the form of Sambia gender identity formation, a pattern that raises a number of problems for all the behavioral sciences.

My anthropological task is this: to explain a puzzling pattern of culturally constituted development in which Sambia heterosexual manhood emerges only after years of normatively prescribed and prolonged homosexual activities. (p. 2)

This pattern involves taking boys from their mothers at the age of seven to ten and engaging them in fellatio with older boys and young men first as fellator then as fellated. They must absolutely avoid women and girls until marriage, and all their activities must be kept secret from women. Upon marriage, which has been arranged some years earlier and which takes place when the girl reaches puberty and the bridegroom is from five to ten years older, the young man must abandon homosexual practices and practice genital intercourse with his wife, though she may fellate him if he wishes.

The rationale for this is expressed in a myth told to Herdt by Tali, a Sambia ritual expert and quoted at the beginning of the Introduction to *Guardian of the Flutes*.

We know that Numboolyu's (fictitious ancestor) penis was sucked by his age-mate who himself became pregnant. His fellator's breast swelled; he changed into a woman. This "woman" then gave birth - but only after Numboolyu created her vulva by slitting open the pregnant pubic area. A girl was the first-born, and so now, girls grow faster than boys... A boy must be initiated and (orally) inseminated, otherwise the girl betrothed to him will outgrow him and run away to another man. (p. 1)

It seems clear that the myth expresses the central concern of Sambia men: to deny the value of women and their contribution to Sambia culture. Even procreation is attributed to a pseudo-woman, who is only a transformed man,

But they must constantly cope with the paradox that reproduction is of primary importance and that, whatever happened in the mythical past, nowadays only women bear children. One of the ways of accomplishing this is to assign gender to certain important plants and animals. Thus nut-bearing pandanus trees are female, while the non-nut-bearing varieties are male or pseudo-male. All Cassowaries are female, though they give birth through the anus. In fact Herdt devotes two whole chapters to the genderizing of pandanus trees and cassowaries.

In his conclusion, Herdt claims, with justification to have explained the meaning of all these myths and rituals which exaggerate the difference between the sexes and emphasize the superiority of men.

In all facets of one's existence the differences between maleness and femaleness are constantly exaggerated and blown up. In the case of idioms this exaggeration amounts to a denial of men's suspicion that femaleness is more primary than maleness. In the instance of erotics, however, it suggests that homosexual experiences, distance, and dehumanization of women are necessary for culturally appropriate heterosexuality and the "reproduction of society". Men need this sexual polarity and hostility to maintain their personal boundaries in love, marriage, and sex. (p. 325)

Herdt does not venture to add that perhaps men's anxiety about women is universal, and the Sambia are distinctive only in the peculiarly dramatic and emphatic ways of expressing this anxiety. Apparently he does not intend to make such extrapolations, for his projected future work will be to delve further into the meaning of the myths and rituals for individual Sambia men.

The reader is struck by the absence from the book of any information about the attitudes of women, except as reported by male informants. It seems that Herdt would not have been allowed to approach the women because of the jealousy of Sambia husbands; there is no evidence that he ever spoke to a woman. He might consider taking a female partner on his next field trip.

He is also very discreet about whether he participated in any of the homosexual activities of the Sambia. Is the informant addressing Herdt when he says:

You and I are in-between men (bisexuals) exactly. We know how to fasten the door on the two groups (women and boys)? (p. 288)

An anthropologist working with a tribe with similar rituals once told me that he was constantly being begged to have oral intercourse with boys to nourish them with the semen which had made him grow so big and strong. And Tobias Schneebaum in his book *Where the spirits Dwell: An Odyssey in the Jungle of New Guinea* "travelled with them as warriors, living with them and loving them - Asmat men freely and physically love other men." (Review by Margaret Mironowicz, *Globe and Mail* February 24 1988). Such

relationships might account for Herdt's profound insights into Sambia psychology, though he should have continued by taking a Sambia wife.

In any case, *Guardians of the Flutes* is an excellent book and constitutes a major contribution to psychological anthropology and to cultural anthropology.

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Denise HELLY, *Les Chinois à Montréal 1877-1951*, Québec, 1987, Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 315 pages.

Par Pierre Beaucauge  
Université de Montréal

Quelque part dans la conscience collective des Québécois, un espace distinct est réservé aux "Chinois". Espace limité, certes, si on compare à celui qu'occupent "les Anglais" ou même "les Juifs", mais tout aussi peuplé de stéréotypes contradictoires. D'un côté, le "pauvre Chinois": depuis le "Chinois de Chine" accablé par la misère et les catastrophes naturelles (la dernière en liste étant le communisme) jusqu'au buandier de naguère, qui ne semblait jamais sortir de son échoppe étouffante et encombrée. De l'autre côté, Fu-man-chu, le Chinois rusé et impénétrable, enrichi de trafics louches et refusant de s'intégrer à l'ensemble nord-américain.

Le livre de Denise Helly permet d'aborder la réalité qui se cache derrière ces stéréotypes en même temps qu'il nous aide à saisir la genèse de ces derniers. Dans une première partie, elle esquisse une ethnohistoire de cette communauté, ethnohistoire qui se fonde à la fois avec celle de la société québécoise mais aussi avec celle des autres collectivités chinoises d'Amérique du Nord.

Car les Chinois de Montréal n'y sont généralement pas venus directement mais sont passés le plus souvent par les chinatowns de la Côte du Pacifique, canadienne ou américaine. L'auteure dégage un fil conducteur dans ces migrations, comme d'ailleurs dans toute l'histoire de la communauté: la poursuite de l'autonomie économique. Une fois leurs contrats terminés avec les grandes entreprises qui les ont amenés, ceux qui restent, fuyant autant que possible le salariat, recherchent des créneaux qui pourraient leur permettre de s'insérer comme travailleurs indépendants dans la société nord-américaine. Ce sera d'abord la blanchisserie (en réponse à la demande, dans des villes pionnières de l'ouest, à population largement masculine) puis la restauration et le commerce.

Pour ces paysans et artisans pauvres qui quittent la Chine méridionale à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, l'Amérique n'est pas cette "terre de liberté" où l'on cherche asile (comme elle l'est pour beaucoup d'Européens). C'est un continent hostile où l'on se rend pour accumuler quelque richesse afin de revenir s'établir au pays. Cette idéologie du retour marquera l'ensemble des manifestations sociales et culturelles du groupe jusqu'au milieu du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle. Ce n'est qu'après le triomphe communiste de 1949 que l'établissement hors de Chine apparaîtra comme définitif à l'immense majorité des membres de la diaspora. (D'où la signification de la date - 1951 - retenue par l'auteure comme terme de son étude.)

Dans la dialectique complexe des rapports qui s'établissent entre une communauté ethnique et la société où elle s'insère, il est généralement malaisé de distinguer les facteurs internes à la communauté (coutumes, répartition entre les classes, image de soi) et ceux qui tiennent à la société dite "d'accueil". Plutôt que de s'en tenir à la simple ethnographie historique l'auteure nous propose sur ce plan d'intéressantes hypothèses. Le Québec a constitué pour la communauté chinoise (comme pour les autres minorités ethniques) un cadre d'insertion tout à fait particulier. Bon gré mal gré, elles ont dû participer à cette "logique de la dualité" qui s'est donnée comme principe organisateur et régulateur de la société et qui cadrait de plus en plus mal avec son pluralisme croissant. L'immigration — fruit d'une politique fédérale explicite — engendrait en effet dans la région de Montréal une situation qui fera peu à peu craquer le binôme originel francophone-catholique / anglophone-protestant.

Pour comprendre la dynamique qui caractérisera la communauté chinoise, l'auteure identifie deux facteurs: la flexibilité relative de la politique canadienne d'immigration après 1967 (même si la forte taxe d'entrée que doivent payer les Chinois montre justement les limites de cette "flexibilité") et le retrait de l'Etat libéral du domaine de l'assistance sociale. Cette dernière sera largement prise en main, tout comme l'éducation d'ailleurs, par des groupes privés, surtout religieux.

Au Québec, ce sont donc les Eglises, catholique et protestantes, qui se partageront la responsabilité de l'accueil aux immigrants, en fonction de leurs ressources et de leurs stratégies respectives. Dans le cas des Chinois, l'Eglise catholique s'attirera au début les plus démunis en leur venant en aide matériellement et culturellement (cours aux adultes...). La "paroisse chinoise" sera érigée selon un