

Culture



Lawrence ROSEN, *Bargaining for Reality: The Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984. 210 pages, US \$20.00 (cloth), US \$8.95 (paper)

Aidan Southall

Volume 6, Number 1, 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078453ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078453ar>

[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

Southall, A. (1986). Review of [Lawrence ROSEN, *Bargaining for Reality: The Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984. 210 pages, US \$20.00 (cloth), US \$8.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 6(1), 78–80. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078453ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1986

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/>

Take trendiness first: Kroeber saw fads in ethnology. Campbell cited our taste for lonely beachheads, a tendency to shun retesting topics earlier stated. But here in fact the rub may be less untrendy topics than ones that do not move DJ. He keeps them well concealed in any case. My topics lead toward understanding the shifting alignments of specific, small horticultural societies, the flow of decisions consequent upon social and political turbulence, the reflex of demographic and ecological contradictions. DJ quite ignores a long discussion of how the local culture rationalizes individual and societal identity amid major contradictions.

On the practice of ethnography, evidently, DJ and I must disagree. Overkill seems rare in documenting this field, perforce perhaps forgivable. After all, the demand for depth (or thickness) must mean something. Given his views, on the other hand, I can't think why he would have me delve into the ledgers of Tairora reciprocity. Surely a detail-laden topic, and after a good century of prior exploration it might also seem worn.

As to "the motor driving [JW's] explanatory scheme," this is gratuitous. The alleged motor is my ipomoean hypothesis—that in Highland New Guinea the sweet potato, a strikingly suitable crop, is also very new. Its rapid, region-wide adoption has potent implications, not least as a plentiful fodder for pigs. In Tairora as elsewhere pigs provide a prestigious gift and a powerful numeraire of marital and other transactions. Alive and well, the ipomoean case has no need to be rehashed at length in the present book. It is mentioned, however, as suggesting a likely recent rise in the turbulence of Tairora life. The main business of the book is its specific ethnographic analyses—the significant and complex coping of a turbulent society. The ipomoean case receives no mention, in fact, until the last chapter, all of eight pages out of 334! There, literally in outline form, is only enough of a sketch to justify the suggestion.

A good third or more of DJ's review focuses on the historicity of the ipomoean case—on perhaps five of the book's final pages. Only generalities are accorded the rest of the book, however; nothing whatever about a long chapter on the magical themes of Tairora ideology, the management of identity in fluid small societies, and so forth. Insisting that it is pivotal, however, DJ presents his doubts about the ipomoean case, taxing me for not making this the central matter he says it is. Since he sees the case as a losing cause, it beclouds for him the cause of the book. Unimportant by itself, perhaps, this cloudy confusion justifies some doubt about the reviewer's grasp of his topic.

Remarkably, however, the premised turbulence of Tairora life is never in doubt. Indeed, DJ argues another—to him surer—source of turbulence, reciprocity itself. (Space for comment is lacking here.) Insofar as my analysis predicates turbulence, then, no more is moot than what sweet potatoes meant. Distracted by this tortuous digression, however, readers of the review may still wonder about the rest of the book. An odd review?

Lawrence ROSEN, *Bargaining for Reality: The Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984. 210 pages, US \$20.00 (cloth), US \$8.95 (paper).

By Aidan Southall
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Sefrou has become the site most meticulously studied by cultural anthropologists in the whole of Africa. They did not study it as a town, though we learn a great deal about it from them. They used it as a window on Moroccan culture—in the joint volume of Rosen with Clifford and Hildred Geertz, the works of Eickelman and Rabinow, and now Rosen's latest study, which might be described as the 'culture of social relations in a small Moroccan city of the Middle Atlas.' In subtlety of perception and clarity of analysis it breaks new ground in this field.

Focusing on 'the ways a set of culture concepts is drawn on in negotiating interpersonal relations', it pursues the proposition that the people of this community create their social reality by constantly bargaining over and through the terms that compose it. 'It is a process and a world of enormous subtlety and vitality.' It might be seen as a study in the symbolic interactionist mode, though that is not the canon invoked. It clearly belongs to the interpretive turn towards the study of meaning in culture, through concentration on speech and concepts in social behavior, not neglecting the action base, but taking speech as a form of action. This is a dominant trend in contemporary anthropology, yet Rosen claims to have adopted it not as a theoretical presupposition but in the authentic manner of responding to the experience of field work. He did look for 'the social groups to which people belonged and the categories and principles by which these families, tribes, quarters and brotherhoods were ordered', only to find that they were 'less corporeal and durable' than ethnography and theory had suggested. Is the interpretive approach the proven way for anthropologists to look at the world and

culture, or an approach demanded by the special qualities of particular cultures such as that of Morocco? Rosen's account makes the latter very convincing, but the former is suggested by his invocation of Austin, Searle, Schutz, Ricoeur and other philosophical authorities. These non-anthropologists were Westerners writing within the perspectives of Western culture, and while the broad sweep of anthropology sometimes risks naivete in specialist fields, so that anthropologists draw on other specialists for inspiration, they have usually found 'universalistic' Western formulations deficient in universality and have had to rework them for other cultures. Doubtless, speech theory has some universal relevance, but Moroccan culture seems to offer quite exceptional ground for its application.

Of all the concepts ingeniously tracked through the labyrinth of Moroccan thought and social interaction, it is the concept of truth which illustrates this most vividly, as in the saying 'if you say you are going to Fez, that means that you are not going. But I happen to know that you are going to Fez. Why have you lied to me, you who are my friend?'

Rosen claims that the very concepts through which situations are defined and relationships established are themselves the subject of constant negotiation. 'Mere utterances imply nothing about the truth of the thing asserted.' Most statements are seen as being no more true or false than a price quoted in the marketplace. Rosen distinguishes assertions, which can be assessed as true or false, from orders, requests, avowals, or pleas, which cannot be weighed for truth value. He notes that truth is not the central feature in the formulations of Austin and Searle, so it seems they provided an inspiring hint rather than immediately applicable theory.

The types of statement which can or cannot be judged as true or false vary from culture to culture. When Moroccans are forming a relationship, nothing they say about their ties to one another or outsiders is taken as having value as true or false. Truth and falsehood are irrelevant to assertions until they are validated 'by ritual confirmation or reliant acts, by evidence of reliability or conducting agreement.' The concept of truth is highly developed, but utterances have to be attached to it by a complex process. This granted, a person can win a reputation as truthful, as court notaries (*adul*) and market officials (*muhtasib*) are expected to do, but only in context, for truth is personal.

There is no punishment for perjury in Moroccan Islamic courts, not because people are expected to lie, but because truth is irrelevant and utterances can have no truth value until validated by the creation of a relationship. A positive act is more believable than a negative one, because it can lead to changed relation-

ships, even beyond the immediate parties, and therefore becomes open to forms of validation. A quarreling couple compelled the involvement of neighbors by their noise and violence, in order to get truth attached to their utterances by establishing a relationship with bystanders. Truth does not inhere in a statement, it happens to it. 'A thing is true as a result of the actions or consequences to which that assertion makes a difference. A lie is what ruptures relationships and the precepts on which they are based. A validated assertion that is untrue can lead to chaos.'

Rosen's theory marks an advance over Geertz' treatment of truth in his bazaar study. It may even explain the rather unconvincing account he gave of the poverty of information in the bazaar. Perhaps Moroccans are so deeply concerned about the truth that they do not let it impinge until it is really important? Is the Moroccan curiosity about relationships a reflection of their stress on privacy?

The first chapter gives a brief historical and economic background to Sefrou, the second outlines the 'construction of social reality', introducing basic concepts such as name, intent, soul, passion, rationality, right, curse, showing how the roots and derivatives of the Arabic terms, for which these glosses are quite misleadingly inadequate, link bewilderingly varied and even opposing ideas. *Hal* implies state and condition, but also change and transformation. *Niya* signifies intent, purpose and will, but also simple, artless and sincere. *Ruh* connotes soul as well as (in Algeria) penis, *nafs* is related to personality, innate worth, as well as potency, vulva (in Algeria) and animal passions unless guided by *agel* (reason). These basic concepts operate in the world of men, rather than the separate world of women, whose 'primary conceptual orientation' differs, stressing the structure of actual relationships, while men stress the perception of human nature. The only woman's conversation reported by Rosen, which necessarily occurred in the company of an old male friend of the family, shows a very clear refusal by the woman to use basic concepts in the man's way. She is certainly also bargaining, but relies on argument from actual relationships rather than principles, and repeatedly evades the man's forceful use of them by insisting that 'its up to God'. Despite the woman's resistance, her daughter was eventually 'convinced' to submit to the hated marriage by 'nearly a week of browbeating' in the old man's home.

The third chapter forms more than half the book and covers the major contexts in which basic concepts are bargained over and social relationships forged: kinship and marriage; saints and shrines; networks as formed and reformed in the course of careers, or fighting elections; followed by further elaboration of the process of validating utterances in the light of speech theory, and illustrated finally by the relations of

Arabs and Berbers, Muslims and Jews. Using Schutz' categories, Moroccans who make all relevant persons into consociates are contrasted with Balinese, who in Geertz' studies 'perceive all others as more or less anonymous and stereotyped contemporaries'. Rosen goes on to describe the development of personal encounters between Arabs and Berbers (from their initial formality to subsequent informality) as switching from Bernstein's restricted to his elaborated code, without adding much enlightenment to his own analysis.

The last chapter considers the narrative aspect of relationship bargaining in literacy sources, and so the concept of time itself, which seems to support the emphasis on social reality as essentially personal and contextual, for past events are only significant as relevant to present relationships, so time is not lineal, or continuous duration, but a constellation, a 'milky way' of instants. 'History is biography.' Time units are significant as sets of relational dynamics, packets of consociational bonds. Those who come before and after, once out of the realm of direct negotiation, become non-consociates and nonpersons. Thus Rosen supplements *homo loguens, fabricans, sapiens, ludens*, with *homo contextus*.

Deirdre MEINTEL, *Race, Culture, and Portuguese Colonialism in Cabo Verde*, Syracuse, N. Y.: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1984. 201 pages.

By M. Estellie Smith
State University of New York-Oswego

Derived in large part from Meintel's doctoral dissertation, this account of race, culture and Portuguese colonialism in that archipelago, located some 300 miles off the coast of Africa and labeled the Cape Verde islands, is a study of a vanished system. The fieldwork began in late 1971 and extended through most of 1972. However, in April 1974 Portugal underwent the bloodless revolution that marked the genuine end of the Salazar regime and, following a popular local referendum, the islands became the Republic of Cabo Verde in July of 1975. Thus, the study was done just as the African wars of independence were forcing the Lisbon regime to make marked changes in their treatment of the Cape Verdeans—partly as a showcase for the 'beneficial results' of Portuguese colonialism—but also just before the final collapse of the colonial empire and the fascist regime on the mainland that had lasted since 1932. Since then, of

course, there have been significant changes in the Islands, not the least of them the result of large amounts of foreign aid for development. The general unsuitability of much of the archipelago for agriculture, fishing, industry or any other form of development, and its vulnerability to drought as well as concomitant famine, has meant that attempts to 'modernize' the region in the last decade have not met with much success. The 300,000+ inhabitants of this 1500+ square mile region are still among the poorest in Africa.

When first discovered in the 15th century the islands were uninhabited, and the lack of water deterred settlers. The earliest history of the islands is as a slaving station and entrepôt, as well as a haven for political exiles, banished criminals, smugglers, and adventurers. Meintel illustrates how and why these islands—despite being ignored and left as a backwater much of their colonial history—became the source (or at least the most popular representative) of a myth centered around the unique format and results of Portuguese colonial rule. The latter, it was claimed, led to a 'raceless' society; some observers of the colonial process scorned this as the result of the Portuguese 'inability to respect their own racial purity' (and not a few references appear concerning the Portuguese penchant for miscengenation). Others praised the disregard of race that so seriously flawed the colonial rule of other nations such as Great Britain. In any case, as the myth went, in Cape Verde society color was irrelevant (as were other phenotypic markers such as hair, nose, lip shape, etc.) and one was judged solely on the basis of personal achievement and culture—with money having the ability to 'whiten' all and any. The examination of this myth and the extent to which race and culture were inextricably intertwined in Portuguese colonial rule are the main foci of this monograph.

Meintel develops the history and ecological/demographic features of the Cape Verde Islands from their initial settlement in 1462 through to the late 1970s. After an introductory chapter on field work (pp. 1-13), she discusses the physical setting of 'African islands in the Atlantic' (pp. 15-29), an historical outline of 'A society built on the slave trade' (pp. 31-53), the history of the crises brought about by repetitive and extended droughts (pp. 55-82), the sociocultural context of race relations during the slavery period (pp. 73-92) and during the post-slavery period (pp. 93-126). The latter chapter, together with the one that follows ('Colonizers and colonized: Cape Verdeans in the Empire,' pp. 127-58) form the heart of the monograph and lay the groundwork for the final chapter, 'Race and culture