

Culture



Maria CÁTEDRA, *This World, Other Worlds: Sickness, Suicide, Death, and the Afterlife among the Vaqueiros de Alzada of Spain*, translated by William Christian, Jr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 389 pages

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[See table of contents](#)

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have not controlled for the position of individual colonies in the growth and fission cycle. The later in the cycle, the closer to creation of a new colony, the harder it is for young men to get positions of responsibility and thus, marriages tend to be postponed. This is probably part of the demographic picture but hardly explains the increasing evidence for a several decade old population decline, or some of the related changes elaborated on by Peter, e.g. *The Dynamics of Hutterite Society* (University of Alberta Press, 1987). Stephenson might have considered dividing this chapter into two parts and better organizing and synthesizing the current demographic data. He also could have more explicitly examined a possible relationship between ideology and relative success in creating new colonies.

Stephenson's emphasis on homeostatic mechanisms colors his view. He refers to evolutionary theory as a "deterministic philosophy" (p.201) which illustrates how little of his theoretical discussions reflect the influence of literature after the mid-1970s. Evolutionary theory has long since incorporated decision-making models, e.g. Boyd and Richardson's *Culture and the Evolutionary Process* (University of Chicago Press, 1985).

Chapters 6 and 7 take us deeply inside the Hutterite's vision of their world (ethos). He shows how even the most mundane routines, spatial arrangements (proxemics), and the presence or absence of symbols reinforce their beliefs in the holy trinity, separation from "the world," and the importance of rebirth. The Holy Spirit and the forces of evil as exemplified by the Evil Eye are tangible and real.

Finally, Stephenson tries to determine how many of the adjustments made within this very adaptive, self-simplifying system (p. 204) are "cognized" action (p.219). He discusses the complexity of the interplay between their rituals and need for the colony to fission which is initially recognized when there are not enough jobs for all the adult males (and indirectly delays baptism and marriage). His description of their symbol system (eidos) is a convincing one and is a good addition to your Hutterite library. The absence of theoretical references after the 1970s may preclude its use in the classroom.

María CÁTEDRA, *This World, Other Worlds: Sickness, Suicide, Death, and the Afterlife among the Vaqueiros de Alzada of Spain*, translated by William Christian, Jr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 389 pages.

By Stacy Leigh Pigg

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"One learns how to die just as one learns how to live" (p. 351), Spanish anthropologist María Cátedra tells us. Her ethnographic portrait of the Vaqueiros de Alzada, people who herd cattle in the Asturian Mountains of Spain, shows how death is a cultural process embedded in a particular way of living. The high suicide rate among the Vaqueiros prompts her to probe deeply into the Vaqueiros sense of "when it is worth the trouble to live and when it is worth the trouble to die" (p.355). The result is a sensitive and insightful study of the relations between cosmology and ecology, household organization and life trajectories, body and soul.

Criticizing "monographs [that] begin with a corpse" (p.4) and in which "the main protagonists, those who die, are barely mentioned" (p.348), Cátedra instead treats death as "a continuum whose center is the physical death itself" (p.5). In doing so, she emphasizes not mortuary rituals but the people who contemplate their own deaths, care for the dying, and mourn those lost to sickness, accidents, or suicide. It is in this conceptualization of the ethnographic study of death that the originality of this work lies. Like other recent ethnographies that make advances by envisioning new domains for analysis or re-drawing the boundaries of the old ones, this book shows it is possible to uncover the cultural dimension of experiences — such as the experience of death and the choice to commit suicide — normally treated as natural, or private, and unknowable.

The book traces the continuum of death in Vaqueiro life by examining sickness, death, and the afterlife. In each of these lengthy sections, the presentation of the ways illnesses, deaths, and spirits (respectively) are classified opens up into a more subtle discussion of what can only be called the Vaqueiro way of life — the hard work of raising cattle in a marginal environment and the interdependencies within and between households in these isolated communities. Three sets of relations —

those between humans and animals, those between the members of a house, and those between the isolated Vaqueiros and the townspeople of the region — are shown to be central both to how people live and die and what the deaths of others mean to them.

The Vaqueiros cooperate in extended households in which one child is chosen as the heir to the house and accepts the responsibility to care for all the elderly (parents, uncles, servants) of the house. The value placed on the continuity of “the house” requires the marginalization of some members of the household. When the dying must be cared for, the division of labour in the household is affected, and the precarious balance between moral obligation and economic interdependency is brought to the fore. Likewise, the inevitable death of the household head raises the issue of inheritance, the conflict between the need of the aging to retain control of the property so as to not be left “unable to defend himself” and the need to ensure the smooth transition of ownership to the next generation. It is in this context that Vaqueiros speak of *gracia*, the pleasure of living, of activity, work, and cooperation in the house, and of *aburrimiento*, a state of mind that settles on one when *gracia* is prematurely lost, whether due to sickness or to deep conflicts and estrangement within a house that leave one vulnerable and marginalized. *Aburrimiento* — a state to which the Vaqueiros attribute the desire to kill oneself — is, according to Cátedra, a product of the stress and conflicts of the inheritance system. People who feel this way are, she says, “socially and cognitively dead.” What suicides do is to “properly hurry on their own death” (p. 203).

Cátedra builds her account from hundreds of hours of taped interviews. Holding that “a good way to get at what people have in their heads is to listen to what they have to say” (p. 26), she aims to value the Vaqueiros’ words by quoting extensively from these interviews. The result is a text that alternates between decontextualized, anonymous quotes from the Vaqueiros and Cátedra’s often repetitive glosses of what they said. Removed from the context of the telling, with virtually all narrative or dialogical content stripped away, and presented as representative examples of shared beliefs, the Vaqueiros’ words lose the very flavour and life Cátedra clearly wants to convey (a problem exacerbated, it appears, by the difficulty of conveying Vaqueiro dialect in translation). It is unfortunate that the ethnography, as a text, fails to do justice to the poignant and subtle vision that emerged from Cátedra’s conversations with Vaqueiros about the meaning of life and death.

Lisa-Marlene EDELSWARD, *Sauna as Symbol: Society and Culture in Finland*, New York: Peter Lang, 1991, 267 pages, US \$41.95 (hardcover).

By Yngve G. Lithman

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Along with *sisu*, that willpower and stamina which characterized both Finnish military participation in WWII and its long-distance runners, the *sauna*, the hot steam-bath, is probably what most people associate with Finnishness. What Edelsward does in her book is to show that this is indeed what the Finns do themselves. Indeed, she claims, the *sauna* has become her guide to understanding Finnish culture.

Her book is based on some extended stays in Finland, as well as 220 responses to a questionnaire with many open-ended questions. These responses are used not only for some rightly cautious quantitative purposes, but more significantly and creatively for a section of quotations called Finnish voices as the end of each chapter. She also uses medical, psychoanalytic and other texts to show how the cultural discourse about *sauna* stresses the beneficial effects of this ‘national heritage.’

Analytically, this book places itself in a growing genre of cultural studies in western societies, where anthropological techniques and tools are used. Geertz’s notion of ‘the use of emotion for cognitive ends’ is used to help explain why the *sauna* is a key symbol. Turner’s discussion of passage rites is applied to having a *sauna* bath (but is there really a transformation of status which takes place when having a *sauna* bath?). The role of ‘invented traditions’ à la Hobsbawm is invoked to situate the *sauna* in the contemporary Finnish nationalistic idiom.

The book has many of the strengths and weaknesses of the genre of which it is a part. It is an interesting and occasionally an enjoyable presentation of a custom, and it actually does manage to say significant things about Finns. The ‘shy Finn’ is elegantly discussed and revealed through his/her *sauna* compartment. In fact, Edelsward occasionally ends up pretty close to the nationalistic claims, as quoted in her book: “The *sauna* is a part of the Finn’s basic character.”