

## Culture



**Michèle DACHER with Suzanne LALLEMAND, *Prix des épouses, valeur des soeurs, suivi de Les représentations de la maladie : deux études sur la société Goin (Burkina Faso)*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992; 203 pages**

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Volume 14, Number 1, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083268ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083268ar>

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### 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

Echenberg, M. (1994). Review of [Michèle DACHER with Suzanne LALLEMAND, *Prix des épouses, valeur des soeurs, suivi de Les représentations de la maladie : deux études sur la société Goin (Burkina Faso)*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992; 203 pages]. *Culture*, 14(1), 87–88. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083268ar>

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Sarah Whitecalf firmly but unpretentiously states her own credentials. In Saskatoon, she is "part of the group" when the elders sit together in the board room (p.25). Although she never went to school, she was "chosen for the work" because she was monolingual; "I am truly a Cree" (p.27). For her, and for her listeners, the language is inseparable from the culture. She expresses regret that she needs interpreters to speak to many Native people, and to whites, "in order for them to be lectured" (p.27), i.e., in order that they might have access to her knowledge.

Some of the reported knowledge was gained by experience, for example, by watching her mother do quill-work. Other things came from the words of her own elders: "Yes, I used to hear about it" or "I did not ever hear her speak about that" (p.31) or "I have lived long enough to have seen . . ." (p.61). Passing on of traditional knowledge is not a place for speculation.

Sarah Whitecalf mourns for today's young people who are "on their own" because many do not have old people to "lecture" them (p.77). It is no wonder that the young no longer know how to listen. Her own words summarize the need to teach (p.75):

These are the things that greatly hurt us and break us; and with these things rampant, we who are old have a great deal of grief, you know, these things break us, they trouble us greatly. We cannot even sleep when we hear of all the things which happen to our relatives, or of all the trouble our children get into; that is what is causing things to break down, you know, that is why our minds are greatly troubled.

These texts are a beautiful memorial to a remarkable woman and to the continuing power of traditional Cree knowledge to shape the lives of contemporary individuals.

Michèle DACHER with Suzanne LALLEMAND, *Prix des épouses, valeur des soeurs, suivi de Les représentations de la maladie : deux études sur la société Goin (Burkina Faso)*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992; 203 pages.

By Myron Echenberg,

McGill University

Michèle Dacher, an ethnographer at EHESS, has been doing fieldwork among the Goin of southwestern Burkina Faso since 1969, and is well placed to

offer these two essays on an interesting but little-known matrilineal society. The first, written with Suzanne Lallemand (who has published research on Voltaic cultures before), deals with the status of women, while the second examines representations of illness. Together, the two subjects offer useful insights into the functional and dysfunctional aspects of Goin society.

The introduction offers the necessary background to an acephalous, matrilineal, patrilocal, farming community which today numbers some 60,000 people densely occupying the small but well watered land which runs from the foot of the Banfora escarpment to the border with Ivory Coast. As is the case elsewhere in West Africa, the Goin matrilineal system is slowly giving way to patrilineage. The colonial regime, the impact of Islam, and the post-colonial administration all favored this trend. Nevertheless, especially in rural areas, many Goin cling tenaciously to their unique culture.

What is rare about Goin society is its system of two obligatory unions for children, which results in the highest bride price payments of any people in Burkina Faso. Males are obliged to pay for two successive licit unions with two different partners, as well as the obligation to cover the costs of marriage feasts. Bride price for a single union in the 1980s was 15,000 CFA (\$60), but gifts and marriage expenses could reach as high as 500,000 CFA (\$2000). The authors estimate that it would take at least ten years for the average Goin farmer to accumulate these funds from the sale of his agricultural surplus, and at least twenty years to be free of the debt for both formal unions. Such a system, the authors argue reasonably, is a device for strong control of juniors, both male and female, and cannot be interpreted simply in feminist terms.

Goin women, Dacher and Lallemand contend, are permanently disadvantaged but not super-exploited, as Meillassoux has argued. They depend on their husbands for rights to land use. When granted, these are limited and always revocable. Nor can a wife ever acquire formal authority in her adopted lineage. Yet women are far from helpless. Since husbands must invest so much money to enter into marriage, they rarely chase away wives. On the contrary, they take care to persuade them not to flee. A woman thus always has the threat of being able to go home to her parents if her husband is demonstrably abusive or miserly. Divorce is rare, then, and Goin marriages very stable. Another protection for

women is public opprobrium. Unlike the Mossi who treat conjugal relations as a very private realm, Goin are vocal to the point of theatricality over marital disputes. Subjecting men to public embarrassment is a favorite weapon of Goin women.

The essay on health is based on close observation of some 120 defined cases of illness, and of the approaches of five traditional healers in the rural village of Gouera, population 1,500. In addition, the study draws on comparative studies that have been done in French on neighboring societies — Bonnet on Mossi; Fainzang on Bisa; Jacob on Winye; Sindzingre and Zempleni on Senoufo. Dacher argues that the Goin are especially resistant to new therapies because they threaten their unique social structure. Thus, although the Goin have etiological categories of disease similar to their neighbors, they show important differences which reflect their unique social structure. The strongly individualistic Goin see illness and therapy as private and even secret matters. Each healer has his own recipes for medicines and his own individual approach to therapy. Dacher makes the significant and credible claim that Goin therapies vary so widely because the symbols which make up their world view no longer, and may never have, constituted a formal system of thought.

The argument, however, that the Goin are particularly resistant to Western bio-medicine is not convincing. Janzen and others have shown that Africans share with people all over the world a pragmatic ability to evaluate different therapies on the basis of efficacy and cost effectiveness, and to be eclectic in their choices. In fact, it is unlikely that the Goin are as isolated from other medical therapies as might be suggested from the narrow perspective of a single remote village. Even in the village of Gouera, Dacher cites the case of a nearby Fulbe healer who was consulted for a bad toothache. She also notes the villagers' expressed wish to have a real dispensary with their own trained nurse "to give injections" ("faire des piqûres"), an allusion no doubt to positive experiences in the past, possibly to anti-smallpox and other vaccination campaigns which began after the Second World War. Finally, it seems odd that the Goin can live so close to the Jula and not begin to be influenced by Muslim therapies, if not in the isolated village, than surely in the larger towns. This is an important book for specialists in anthropology and health in Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, but the absence of data on changes occurring in larger Goin towns makes it less valuable than its subject matter gave reason to expect.

Peter HARRIES-JONES (ed.), *Making Knowledge Count: Advocacy and Social Science*, Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. 250 pages, (cloth).

By Peter Armitage

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*Making Knowledge Count* is a welcome addition to a still limited literature on advocacy and the social sciences. In a smorgasbord of case studies of advocacy research in action in Canada and other parts of the world, Peter Harries-Jones and his contributing authors have provided a useful overview of how, why, and in what contexts social science research can be married to political advocacy. The collection provides a quick peek at various methodological, epistemological, and ethical concerns that permeate advocacy research while guiding us through several advocacy research domains such as human rights in Chile, refugee policy in Canada, ethnic/race relations, peace advocacy, gender and labour relations, critical pedagogy, feminist and daycare advocacy. Harries-Jones' insightful introductions throughout the book save it from incoherence because they define key terms, flag dilemmas, frame the research issues, and explore interconnections between themes and arguments.

Harries-Jones points to one obvious weakness in the collection at the outset, namely, the lack of a contribution on ecological advocacy and social science. However, the book suffers from several other weaknesses that diminish its utility as a teaching tool and vehicle for in-depth debate and analysis of advocacy research's merits and dilemmas. For example, very little attention is given to the crucial role that mass media plays in constraining or facilitating advocacy work and in shaping public attitudes and policy-making processes. The collection would have benefitted greatly from an article devoted exclusively to the interface between advocacy researchers and journalists in order to explore issues such as the constraints placed on advocacy discourse in meeting the requirements of "sound bites," "good visuals" and other elements of news work, as well as challenges to the credibility of social scientists when they engage in advocacy.

Despite Harries-Jones' statement that advocacy thrives on reflexive circularities, there is very little reflexivity in this collection as it relates to an examination of ethical, epistemological and methodological problems of conducting advocacy research. A