

Culture



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This rather ambitious book offers both a general monograph of the Araweté society, a Tupi-Guarani group from the Middle Xingu, Brazil, as well as an essay on some of the more salient features of the cultural area which soon becomes a proposal for much broader philosophical insights into the nature of society. The two *genres* are certainly legitimate but they remain quite different and should be evaluated separately.

The ethnography is the result of fieldwork which led to the obtention of a doctoral degree in 1984 from the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro. Araweté society belongs to the vast cultural tradition of the Tupi-Guarani which, although long famous in the literature (ever since the earliest accounts of Tupinamba cannibalism), has been more or less left out of the recent proliferation of new ethnographies on the societies of low-land South America; to give an example from the same area, a whole new generation of ethnographic reports has in the last twenty years paid far more attention to the neighbouring Gê societies. The author describes a small society which at times inhabits a village with gardens and at other times roams in the forest as hunters. Viveiros de Castro covers the usual ethnographic spectrum: the geo-political context in which the Araweté find themselves today, the material culture, food production, sexual division of labour, the relatively flexible mechanisms for group formation, the essential features of the kinship system, of political leadership, shamanism, ceremonial life and the general cosmology.

Viveiros de Castro often seems unwilling to resist the temptation of taking leave from his description and adding to the ethnographic account a few remarks, some digressions or intuitions inspired by what has just been said. By chapters 8, 9, and 10 the ethnography is entirely overshadowed by a most interesting essay on cannibalism, the nature of the relations between gods, humans and the deceased,

which in turn leads to speculations on the crucial importance of alliance, as well as on the peculiar and brilliant way the Tupinamba conceived of the other (the "enemy" of the title) as central to their own life.

In all, this makes for a book which, beyond its obvious contribution to ethnography, might well seem both stimulating and frustrating. Its main weakness is elementary and blatant: the entire work is based on a short fieldwork experience of six visits for a total of at the most eleven months with between 136 (in 1983) and 168 (1988) Araweté living in one single village close to a FUNAI outpost. As the author is an honest man, he does not claim to have learned the language well and his account often admits "There are many things I cannot explain . . ." "I do not know how to translate . . .," "I am at a loss to push it further . . ." A few times, though rarely, the author appears to provide the answer himself, as when discussing the role of women in the local theory of reproduction, and after stating that the answer he obtained was a "grammatically abstract explanation", he nevertheless goes on to tell us why some children resemble their mothers. At worst, this may sound like a doctoral dissertation in which one typically throws in every known bit of ethnographic information and then tries to impress examiners with intelligent and informed discussions of every shred of evidence, leading the critic to remark that with a few more years of fieldwork and much tightening up of the various loose arguments, the whole work would become somewhat more rigorous. But at best, Viveiros de Castro constructs a stimulating and fresh reading of the Tupi material which could renew our understanding of cannibalism and which even offers a genuine lesson for any theory of society.

When the book is taken as an essay, whether the ethnography is adequate becomes perhaps less important than the quality of the discussion and the logical coherence of the thesis. What is proposed here could never be summarized and one can only whet the appetite, but the claim is that indeed, as Lévi-Strauss suggested, alliance is superior to filiation, that cannibalism is a rebellion against submission to others and to death, that social life can be based on such unexpected notions as an inchoate person and society as a constant paradox, that cannibalism is an animal critique of society as well as a desire for divinization, and that the "other" celebrated by all theories of society can be a destiny rather than the usual mirror for people who see themselves as 'becoming' rather than 'being'. This is challenging stuff and Viveiros de Castro profits from an agile and sharp mind.