

Culture



James WATSON, *Tairora Culture: Contingency and Pragmatism*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1983. 346 pages, US \$35.00 (cloth)

Dan Jorgensen

Volume 5, numéro 1, 1985

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078346ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078346ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Jorgensen, D. (1985). Compte rendu de [James WATSON, *Tairora Culture: Contingency and Pragmatism*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1983. 346 pages, US \$35.00 (cloth)]. *Culture*, 5(1), 88–89.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1078346ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1985

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

James WATSON, *Tairora Culture: Contingency and Pragmatism*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1983. 346 pages, US \$35.00 (cloth).

By Dan Jorgensen
University of Western Ontario

This is an odd book to review: it's full of wonderful ethnographic detail that only skilled fieldworkers provide, but it manages to dissipate these strengths by inattention to what contemporary anthropology has been up to. The result is a period piece, at once quaint and deficient, a reminder of past concerns. In this book Watson addresses old questions in an old manner, but perhaps more thoroughly than in the days when all this was news.

The first generation of fieldworkers in the New Guinea highlands made social structure their first order of business only to find these societies refractory to available modes of analysis. Operating with a segmentary model after the Africanist fashion, ethnographers soon found themselves trying to account for a disturbing untidiness in social arrangements: groups fused and split along lines that made hash of formal segmentary patterns. Despite an apparent emphasis on descent, recruitment could not be genealogically specified without enumerating exceptions that threatened to overwhelm the rule. What emerged from this in the 1960s was a debate on "loose structure" in New Guinea societies in which a range of analytic alternatives jostled for precedence. Meggitt looked to ecology and demography by suggesting a sliding scale of agnation varying with land shortage; Langness argued for more attention to the relation between ideology and practice; Pouver urged a refinement of our notions of structure, and Wagner queried the appropriateness of the segmentary model itself and turned instead to an understanding of indigenous models as the key. Watson too was a participant in the debate, and his solution was that we should try to unravel things by focusing more intently on the empirical details of shifting alignments on the ground. This is what he attempts to do in this book.

The loose structure controversy is far behind us now and ethnographic concerns have moved on, though the positions taken up in the debate are still indicative of important differences in current styles of work. *Tairora Culture* is a book that seems determined to resuscitate the argument. Its main theme is the apparently haphazard nature of

Tairora social life—the contingency of the subtitle. Watson links this to a pervasive pragmatism that reflects people's attempts to deal with a social environment characterized by demographic flux. The motor driving this particular explanatory scheme is Watson's "ipomean hypothesis." Seizing upon the New World origins of sweet potato (*Ipomea batatas*), the New Guinea highlands staple, the hypothesis takes a presumptively recent (i.e., post-Magellan) adoption of this crop as its point of departure. Sweet potato does better than most tropical crops in highland elevations and is particularly suitable as pig fodder since it is edible without cooking. In Watson's view the advent of sweet potato must have triggered a number of significant changes in highland life, the most important of which were intensification of pig husbandry and a population explosion leading to crowding and competition for land. These factors, in turn, are held responsible for an increase in warfare and the population shifts brought in its train. All of this then gets put together to account for the Tairora readiness to assimilate newcomers into territorial groups or to cut and run as circumstances dictate.

The argument is plausible enough as it runs, but there are a series of weaknesses that combine to frustrate the author's attempts to be convincing. Precious little in the way of archaeological evidence is cited, and one suspects that some of Golson's Kuk site results would be disturbing to post-Magellanic premises. Demography is not on Watson's side, and while he remains unconvinced of Brookfield & White's caveats, the reader is not given much to go on by way of rebuttal. Perhaps the strongest point of Watson's argument is his "Jones effect." This is an argument that suggests that the adoption of sweet potato was decisively influenced by the consequences of attempts to even out local imbalances in pig production, as groups (or "personnels" in his eccentric terminology) sought parity with neighbours who were at once allies, rivals, and enemies—keeping up with the Joneses. But the rub, so far as the book goes is this: the strategic locus of the framework is exchange, feasting and marrying, and a much fuller discussion of reciprocity and its modalities is needed. For example, it is tendentious to assume that maximization in pig production equals maximization of brides and therefore population in the New Guinea highlands: often enough the suppliers of women are also the suppliers of pork. There have been a number of brilliant analyses of the role of reciprocity in Melanesian social life (e.g., Brown, Burridge, LeRoy, Rubel & Rosman, Schieffelin,

Schwimmer, Strathern, Wagner, and Young, to name a few), but none of these figure in Watson's account. What we have is a pre-alliance theory view of what groupness and intergroup relations are all about.

It is no surprise that one ends up with contingency as a theme: relations founded on reciprocity are by definition conditional, promise must always be backed by performance. A comparative look at Melanesian societies suggests that, following Schwimmer, we might do better to account for the flux of social life in these terms. The shiftiness of loyalties and the readiness to realign and so on are less the products of breakdown forced by circumstance than consequences of a reliance on reciprocity as the governing mode of relationship.

In explanatory terms, the error lies in the attempt to account for a general phenomenon (the flexibility of reciprocal relationships) with recourse to something far more particular, the so-called "Ipomean revolution" in the New Guinea highlands. Watson seems to have been led to this by a no-nonsense empiricism only capable of apprehending social life as pragmatic behaviour, a stance aggressively paraded throughout the book. In the end, *Tairora Culture* must live with empiricism's strengths and weaknesses: a wealth of fine-grained details atomistically arrayed. Flying close to the ground, Watson cannot be accused of presenting an over-ordered account of Tairora society, and their status as *ad hoc* pragmatists is secure. But from this elevation all one can see is trees—the shape of the forest remains uncharted.

Norman A. CHANCE, *China's Urban Villagers: Life in a Beijing Commune*, Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984. 159 pages, \$12.80 (paper).

By *Ellen R. Judd*
St. Thomas University

The publication of an ethnography on China based on recent fieldwork is a very welcome addition to the available anthropological literature on China and on peasant societies in general. Access to the field in China is restricted to the extent that the two and a half months Norman Chance and his co-researchers were able to spend investigating a village (production brigade) in Red Flag Commune in 1979 was an unusually ample period of research.

The resulting ethnography, *China's Urban Villagers*, will be a valuable text in first courses on China or in introductions to peasant societies, although it offers almost nothing new to research on China or to the comparative study of either peasant or socialist societies. The strengths of the book are in its effort to give a vivid, human portrayal of contemporary life in a Chinese village and in its effort to indicate the lines through which the village is vertically integrated into the larger society of which it is part.

The date of the study—1979—is significant, as the current policies of dismantling the main structures of the rural collective economy were only beginning to be implemented and had not yet had a great impact on Red Flag Commune. The study is of a rural socioeconomic structure which could be seen as becoming a thing of the past even as the ethnography was being written. The original intent of the researcher to investigate China's non-capitalist road to development was consequently frustrated to a considerable degree. It is, however, fortunate that his research team was able to investigate a production brigade before the recent changes. Opportunities to research the new rural "responsibility system" are likely to become more common in the future. The slightly out-of-date quality of this ethnography may be viewed as one of its particular strengths. The author was well aware of the impending changes, and has usefully oriented some of his discussion to the issue of rural socioeconomic factors favouring either the changes or the retention of the collective structures.

What had been intended as a study of a qualitatively different mode of economic development, and in part remains such a study, shifted its emphasis to a study of more conventional modernization in a village near a major metropolis. If the particular issues of suburban rural life were not at the source of this study, Norman Chance has nevertheless done well to emphasize them by his choice of title. Despite the essentially rural milieu, the villagers whom he and his associates studied had very substantially greater involvement in a non-rural economy than do most Chinese villagers. The careful attention Norman Chance gives to the specificities of this situation are essential in distinguishing this quite atypical village.

The limitations of this study, valuable as it is, deserve mention in that they indicate some major problems confronted by anthropologists who undertake the study of complex societies in the modern world. Invariably such study requires that the anthropologist, oriented toward holism in the study of non-complex societies, find some means of