
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Douglas Oliver, *Two Tahitian Villages: A Study in Comparison*. Laie, Hawaii: The Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1981. Pp. xiv, 557, illustrations. \$24.95.

Review: GREG DENING
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Douglas Oliver has something of the scholastic philosopher in him. I wince to think of his comment on my saying that, but I mean it as a compliment. His work has the quality of a summa, a rational and exhaustive exploration of carefully defined universes of knowledge. He has as well the other mark of a Thomas Aquinas, a belief that, in the end, knowledge is awareness of the degrees of one's certainties. There are few scholars so precise and careful as Oliver in defining his own ambiguities, not out of false humility but out of confidence in logic, the weighing of evidence, and common sense. In that common sense lies a third scholastic quality: he is anthropological--he holds to universals in the human environment. Maybe that is not so much scholasticism as utilitarianism born of Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham, pragmatism born of William James, a conviction that whatever their relative expression, human passions and human needs are everywhere recognizable.

There are other distinguishing qualities of his work. His studies are monumental, I do not mean large, although they are that, and Oliver will often tease his readers with his lengthiness. He has some disdain for the present expressed in its trends and fads. He does not bother with reflexive debate, although in this volume he refers rather ruefully to the

silence that greeted his early forays into reflection on ethnographical method. He admires monumental work of the past and he himself writes for the future. He dedicated that most monumental of all Pacific works, *Ancient Tahitian Society*, to Raymond Firth, Kenneth Emory, and John Beaglehole. I would guess he did so because he admires their precise scholarship, but I would also say that it was because he conceives of learning and scholarship as service to ends beyond present recognition. He delights in what others have done well because they make museums of knowledge in which he can learn. His own work is exhaustive, encyclopedic, because he writes not so much for readers as for libraries, and wishes the future his own joy in discovering what someone else bothered to record. This is not nostalgia to put down on paper cultures that are inevitably disappearing. Douglas Oliver is not a nostalgic man, unless it be for the world of the classic medieval historian. It is an epistemological stand. There is for him a permanence in knowledge that is an end in itself.

One would have to add that there are few ethnographers as precisely historical as he. Perhaps contextual or environmental might be better words than historical. I mean there are few ethnographers who are as ready to describe cultures as they actually are in the time and space in which they are observed. It is the occupational hazard of ethnography to blinker out the Coca-Cola cans and to distil what is "native" from the twentieth-century brew of their cultures. Douglas Oliver pays his Tahitian villagers the compliment of being interested in who they actually are. He has no illusions that he has discovered the quintessential Tahitian. In the old debate between Dominicans and Jesuits about the real distinction between essence and being, Oliver is the Jesuit: there is no such real distinction. The Tahitian villagers *are* what they are observed to *do*. They might not do the same, two villages away. They might not do the same tomorrow that they did yesterday. They might not do unobserved what they do observed. His description catches them circumstantially, not in models.

All the characteristics that have marked Douglas Oliver's style are present in *Two Tahitian Villages* --the self-deprecatory honesty, the realism touched with a little breezy cynicism, the structured measured progress through the problem, the whimsical examples. Self-denial in reflection goes a little further this time, however. It is relegated to an appendix in the last pages of a 550-page book. Published nearly thirty years after the fieldwork on which it is based, the book has a sense of obligation to his students, his colleagues, and himself hanging heavily over it. The brilliant achievement of *Ancient Tahitian Society* has come

between the beginning and the end of this work. It lacks the immediacy of *A Solomon Island Society* and the economic liveliness of *Pacific Islands*. I have to say that despite the vigorousness with which he pursues the comparative method, his refusal to say what he thinks it means in relationship to wider issues is maddening to those who have a greater confidence in his wisdom than he.

I have a sense of *pietas* toward Douglas Oliver. He is my mentor, I his student. I have in any case a very negative attitude toward reviews and reviewing. I find reviews, and my own temptation in reviewing, to be skeptical rather than critical. Reviewers are more inclined to want authors to have written a different book closer to the reviewer's talents and interests than to be critically appreciative of what the writer has done within the self-imposed limitations of any study. I take the stance, then, of this journal to be constructive. It produces for the author the opportunity to create something new in addition to the book that is now launched and over whose reading the author has now lost all control. Skeptically speaking, I could never write a book like *Two Tahitian Villages*. Ethnography for me is much more fictional and existential. It is fictional, an artifact, something made. It is the experience of observation translated into the medium of the book. It portrays rather than lays out a culture. And whatever its permanence, it inevitably speaks to a very particular discourse. It *is* a sentence in a conversation anthropologists, humanists, are having about something much wider than the time and place in which it is begun. I, the student, want of Oliver, the master, not a response to my compliments or my skepticism, but his reflections on the state of the art of ethnography and a rationale of his distinctive descriptive structures. My own students have responded marvelously to the descriptive structures of *Ancient Tahitian Society*: they have no complaints, like petulant reviewers, about its vocabulary. They are entranced by its clarity. They will not, I think, grasp those structures too clearly in *Two Tahitian Villages*. I would like them to have a crib on Oliver by Oliver.