They Lie, We Lie: Gettingon With Anthropology, Peter Metcalf

Robert L. Winzeler
puis les apories et contradictions internes de l’appareil législatif concernant l’Autonomie Régionale et la répartition des pouvoirs entre échelons administratifs.

Très énergiquement, Vedi Hadiz (Dept. of Sociology, NUS) et Vivienne Wee (Dept. of Applied Social Studies, City University of Hong Kong) ont exposé successivement les dynamiques locales et nationales de la réorganisation des pouvoirs en Indonésie et un cas d’étude concernant les mouvements indigénistes dans l’archipel de Riau. Cette étude de cas fut complétée et approfondie par la présentation de Carole Faucher (Dept. of Sociology, NUS) sur la réorganisation administrative et la nouvelle hiérarchie des pouvoirs dans la même province.

Maribeth Erb (Dept. of Sociology, NUS), Michel Picard (Lasema-CNRS) et Minako Sakai (Australian Defence Force Academy, University of New South Wales) ont, chacun par un cas d’espèce détaillé, présenté les velléités de scissions et subdivisions administratives au sein des districts, respectivement à Manggarai, Bali et Bangka-Belitung. Ces phénomènes de (re-) construction identitaire, liés à la décentralisation, suivent les intérêts particuliers et locaux et les stratégies singulières des élites en conflit.

Muriel Charras (Lasema-CNRS) a resitué historiquement les déséquilibres géographiques de l’archipel indonésien comme point de départ des volontés et des dynamiques d’autonomie régionale. Yunita T. Winarto et Semiarto A. Purwanto (Dept. of Anthropology, Universitas Indonesia) ont insisté, de manière théorique, sur la gouvernance locale et les conflits d’intérêt dans la gestion des ressources naturelles agricoles, puis forestières. Enfin, dans le même sens, mais de manière pratique, Nicolas Buyse (étudiant EHESS-IRD) a présenté la construction, l’organisation et l’impact de la décentralisation sur la gestion forestière locale à partir d’études de cas à Malinau, un nouveau district de Kalimantan-Est.


Aujourd’hui, si l’état des recherches reste embryonnaire du fait même du caractère récent autant que de l’ampleur des changements et des bouleversements politiques en cours en Indonésie, la publication des actes de ce colloque (chez Routledge, courant 2003) devrait permettre d’établir une excellente base pour des études comparatives aux échelles micro-locale, régionale, ou nationale.

Pour plus d’information sur le programme et les interventions du colloque, contacter: <nicolas_buyse@yahoo.com>.

**LIVRES / BOOKS**

*They Lie, We Lie: Getting on With Anthropology,*  

By Robert L. Winzeler*

The title of this elegantly written book about Peter Metcalf’s fieldwork among the longhouse-dwelling Berawan of northern central Borneo has a double meaning. In literal terms, the phrase “They lie, we lie” is a translation of a formulaic opening used by a Berawan elder to begin her narration of a sacred epic. The author regards the statement as profound and, therefore, offers no exact interpretation of its meaning except to say that it is definitely not intended to imply that the narrator is about to tell fairy stories that no one should take seriously as, for example, with “Once upon a time.” He suggests that what is essentially being conveyed is the proposition that the narrator is about to repeat what has been passed down to her from the ancestors, and that if she is lying it is because they lied – the converse presumably being that if they spoke the truth, so does she.

The second meaning of the title is intended to be an ironic proposition about anthropology at the opening of the twenty-first century. Metcalf begins with the sly observation that since the truth of anthropological accounts has been called into
question by postmodern criticism, perhaps it is better to write about lies – both the ones that informants tell anthropologists and those that are told in anthropological accounts. He promises to reveal “white lies and ones black as night, evasions, exaggerations, delusions, half truths, and credible denials,” but the reader will find outright lies, either black or white, in short supply. What the book is mostly about is conflicting interests, complexities and ambiguities, and the difficulties of getting to the bottom of things. And while all of this may sound like a postmodern view of fieldwork and anthropological accounts, the book in actuality is written against postmodernist epistemology, as indeed a book about lies would seem to have to be, because, of course, you cannot have lies without also having some contrasting notion of truth. Beyond noting that postmodernism is nihilistic (and therefore self-negating), Metcalf states that its effects have been especially pernicious in anthropology, in particular for beginning anthropologists trying to get through fieldwork and then on with the always difficult (and frequently unsuccessful) process of making something of it in terms of published ethnography. Hence, one of the main purposes of the book is revealed by the subtitle, “getting on with anthropology” and providing the knowledge that the broader intellectual and ordinary public wants and needs from it – and that it will otherwise get mainly from sensationalist hacks in the form of distorted accounts of the exotic. As for the often noted issue of whether the anthropologist has the right to represent to the world a society of which s/he is not a member and with which s/he will usually have a very limited firsthand relationship, Metcalf’s claim is that he was given a mandate to do so by the Berawan. During his first period of fieldwork, they told him to “make the name Berawan big” – the Berawan being a small ethnic group consisting of only four villages, and very aware of being surrounded by much larger populations of Kayan, Kenyah, Malay, and Iban.

This he did, at least in the anthropology of Borneo and in the literature on death rituals and secondary mortuary practices, in particular. And in this book he does so again, but he also makes the name of one particular Berawan big. This is Bilo Kasi, a small but formidable and influential older aristocratic woman, whose photograph appears on the cover as a younger woman, standing in front of the Union Jack that went with British colonial rule in Sarawak until the formation of Malaysia in 1963. It was Kasi who began her renditions of the death chants and epic stories with the phrase “They lie, we lie” and who served as Metcalf’s chief source of information, but who also, he claims, did as much to hinder as to help him and who figures prominently is his discussions of the difficulties he encountered.

Part of the book is devoted to sorting out lies and truth in two particular realms – the Berawan death songs and Berawan ethnicity. But what standard of truth should be applied to what he was told or not told, and to what he has told us in his publications on the Berawan? At an early point he compares the Berawan notions of veracity with those of the Mopan Maya (and it is the latter who seem more exotic to the Westerner), but maybe he should have chosen an example much closer to Borneo, that is, the Javanese as described by Clifford Geertz, whose name is very big in anthropology. In one of the (to me) more memorable passages in The Religion of Java (1960: 246), Geertz states that, in contrast to those who normally need a reason to lie, with the Javanese it seems that it is more the other way around. Geertz might or might not be willing to say such a thing today, and in any case he refers to white lies, qualifies his assertions, and explains that the purpose of Javanese dissimulation is not really to manipulate or take advantage of others, but to protect the self and avoid conflict or unpleasantness if at all possible.

By this standard of needing a reason to lie, the Berawan do not appear to be any more deceitful than anyone else, and perhaps less so than some. In the matter of Kasi and the death songs, if she lied (and it seems to have been more a matter of refusals and evasions than lies), it was not without reason – the reason being that reciting or discussing the songs would bring new death to the longhouse, a rather impressive reason in my view. Metcalf evidently did not believe this, though I would think that even a complete skeptic would worry about being blamed if people died after he had gotten someone to recite or discuss the songs outside of their appropriate mortuary ritual context. He did his best to learn about the songs and, in doing so, played his own little games of deception (such as
pretending that he already knew things that he did not). As far as I can tell, he does not exactly say that he believes that Kasi herself did not really believe that reciting or talking about the death songs would bring death. He does believe that she, in particular, had other reasons for keeping the songs from him and discusses these reasons in the final chapter. However, we also learn that she was hardly the only one in the longhouse to believe that the death songs were very dangerous. All in all, the Berawan seem to have had a better reason to fib about the death songs than the author did in trying to learn about them, as he would probably be happy to concede.

As for Berawan ethnicity, Metcalf presents the matter as not so much a tissue of lies, black, white, or grey, as a sort of black hole of bottomless ambiguity and change. In brief, Berawan is an exonym (a term used by outsiders to refer to a group) rather than an endonym (a term used by the members of a group to refer to themselves). The Berawan actually refer to themselves as Melawan, except when talking to outsiders, because, he explains, melawan in Malay (the lingua franca of the country) means “to oppose.” Further, each of the four Berawan (or Melawan) villages is either dubiously Berawan or ethnically composite. All of the Berawan moved from somewhere else into the lower Baram River area, in some instances into empty places, and into some places where other smaller, waning, or vulnerable groups were already located. The latter were willing to accept them as a way of surviving. Ancestors and rituals, as well as longhouses, were combined, but eventually the smaller, more indigenous groups were absorbed by the newcomers, socially and linguistically, although with different outcomes in different places. Yet further complications to Berawan ethnicity result from the frequent tendencies for place names or toponyms to get mixed up with ethnonyms and for both to get garbled when translated into Malay. Metcalf recounts all of this with much enthusiasm and wit.

The problem with ethnicity, if there is one at all, is mainly oversimplification. But even here, the Berawan themselves do not appear to have been the least bit evasive or difficult about revealing or discussing anything. Metcalf notes that they were willing to tell him as much about their complex ethnic background as they thought he was capable of understanding. For his own part, Metcalf did oversimplify Berawan ethnicity in his previous books. In these the Berawan are simply Berawan, not even Melawan, let alone partly Lelak, Tring, Pelutan, and so on. But he had a reason to do so, which was that he wanted to keep the discussion focused on the main topics, and not get into a side show on ethnicity. Well, perhaps the readers of these books could have handled the full truth about Berawan ethnic complexity without becoming bewildered, but if so it is hard to find much fault here.

I am happy to be able to recommend this book to a wide range of readers, especially to ones who are willing to give an author some slack and do not mind having the truth or lies of anthropological fieldwork and analysis recounted in thirty-six-bit color rather than greyscale. Anthropologists and others interested in Borneo will appreciate the new information and the criticisms of earlier work. But the book also has much to offer those who will not care whether the setting is Borneo, New Guinea, South America, Cairo, or Los Angeles.

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Par Pascal COUDERC

Dans une célèbre monographie consacrée en 1955 aux Iban de Sarawak, Derek Freeman montrait que, par le biais notamment d’un mode de résidence par lui baptisé « utrolatéral », la famille domestique constituait la clé de voûte de cette société, sa seule unité vraiment pérenne et même perpétuelle, et il en comparait l’autonomie à celle d’un « pays souverain ». Ses successeurs ont remarqué que, dans son souci de prouver, contre Radcliffe-Brown, la cohérence structurelle des sociétés cognatives (et de leur conférer ainsi une respectabilité anthropologique), Freeman s’était peut-être insuffisamment affranchi de l’emprise de la théorie des groupes de

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