SEEING A CULTURE WITHOUT SEAMS:
The Ethnography of Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff

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AMAZONIAN COSMOS: THE SEXUAL AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM OF THE TUKANO INDIANS. By GERARDO REICHEL-DOLMATOFF. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1971.)
THE SHAMAN AND THE JAGUAR: A STUDY OF NARCOTIC DRUGS AMONG THE INDIANS OF COLOMBIA. By GERARDO REICHEL-DOLMATOFF. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1975. Pp. 280. $15.00.)
BEYOND THE MILKY WAY: HALLUCINATORY IMAGERY OF THE TUKANO INDIANS. By GERARDO REICHEL-DOLMATOFF. (Los Angeles, Calif.: UCLA Latin American Center, 1978. $25.00.)

The underlying base of Native American religion, wrote Weston La Barre in 1970, was and continues to be even now an essentially Mesolithic-type of Eurasiatic shamanism, originally carried into the New World by early bands of big-game hunters and food gatherers. Shamanism by definition is inseparable from the ecstatic-visionary experience, and it is this, according to La Barre and other recent students of the phenomenon, that explains the extraordinary proliferation of sacred hallucinogenic or psychoactive plants in indigenous ritual, especially in Mexico and parts of South America. No fewer than eighty to one hundred of these botanical hallucinogens have thus far been catalogued, principally by Harvard's Richard Evans Schultes, and more are coming to light with each passing year. In any event, La Barre's "shamanistic-ecstatic base" can be identified not only in the religions of hunters and gatherers, but, significantly, of agricultural peoples as well, not excluding the great Meso-American and Andean civilizations of the pre-European past.

If this shamanistic base was not previously recognized, or continues to be questioned or even rejected, it is because of the mistaken assumption that shamanism is a phenomenon of a "primitive" world, and would thus have to be exclusive to preagricultural societies, particularly those of northeastern Asia and the Arctic. Indeed, it is often coupled with the adjective "simple," the implications being that shamanism is too archaic, too primitive, or too naive to be associated with complex socioeconomic conditions, or even with tropical forest or highland agriculture. In fact, judging from the sophistication and complexity of sha-

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manistic Ice Age art, the shamanistic world view has probably not been "simple" for tens of thousands of years; certainly, as recent studies of shamanism in northern South America or Indian Mexico have shown, it is in no sense "simple" wherever it survives today in the New World.

Among modern fieldworkers, no one has done more to explore the complexities of this phenomenon and its functional interrelationship with the ritual use of sacred hallucinogenic plants than the Austrian-born Colombian anthropologist Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff. Formerly chairman of the Department of Anthropology at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Reichel-Dolmatoff is best known to English-speaking readers for books on Colombian archaeology and art—*Colombia* (1965), in the Praeger Ancient Peoples and Places series, followed in 1972 by *San Agustín, A Culture of Colombia,* also published by Praeger—and on the intellectual culture of Colombian Indians—*Amazonian Cosmos, The Shaman and the Jaguar,* and *Beyond the Milky Way.* He has also published a number of major articles on South American Indian mythology and symbolism and the use of the hallucinogenic *yajé* vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) in ecstatic vision quests. Less well known, but indispensable as a first-hand source work, is a two-volume ethnography in Spanish on the Kogi of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (1950–51), a traditional indigenous society whose complex religion and temple cult are again the focus of his current research.

In *The Shaman and the Jaguar,* Reichel-Dolmatoff considers the role and use of different hallucinogenic plants, including potent psychoactive snuffs, by South American Indians in general, particularly as they function in the central experience of shaman-jaguar identification and transformation. But in much of his ethnographic work, including this seminal ethnographic study of feline symbolism that figures so heavily in the iconography of pre-Hispanic art in Meso- and South America, and in his earlier *Amazonian Cosmos,* he focuses specifically on the Desana, a small subgroup of the Tukano, numbering some one thousand members, living mainly in the dense and humid equatorial rain forest of the Vaupés, in northwestern Amazonia. As is often true of names applied to tribal peoples, Desana, a term of apparent Arawakan origin, is not their own designation; rather, they call themselves alternately *wira-pora,* Sons of the Wind, or *mimi-pora,* Sons of the Hummingbird, the little bird recognized as mythological ancestor by all their sibs. The Desana economy is a mixed one of hunting, fishing, and horticulture, but although the products of the hunt make up only a quarter of the total daily food intake, they—or, more accurately, their men—insist that they are first and foremost hunters, and consign fishing and horticulture to a far lower place on their scale of values. The principal products of horticulture are bitter manioc as the basic staple, plantains, bananas,

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yams, sweet potatoes, pineapple and chili peppers, and it is on these, augmented by fish and game, that the Desana rely, notwithstanding the assertion that the life of the hunter is the only one fit for a man.

All this sounds like standard ethnography, with emphasis on economics and social structure in relation to tropical forest ecology, and if it were, Reichel-Dolmatoff's place among modern fieldworkers would already be assured. But there is more, much more, for he is one of the lamentably small handful of ethnographers who insist that the ideology and intellectual life of native peoples deserve to be taken seriously—as seriously, indeed, as do the carriers of the culture themselves—and who recognize not just the decisive role of ideology in the regulation and organization of daily life but the functional interrelationship of mental life with the environment, whether sociocultural or natural. Equally to the point, in accepting the validity of native ideology and explanation, Reichel-Dolmatoff avoids the pitfalls of imposing Western categories, or the fragmented Western world view in which these categories are sealed off in discrete pigeonholes. (Parenthetically, it might be noted that his main informant for *Amazonian Cosmos*, in the course of talking to the ethnographer and explaining his culture to him, himself began to see the inner connections between contemporary Desana social structure and the origin myths, environment, and hallucinogenic yajé visions in which ancestors, culture heroes, and events and places of native history reveal themselves and their validity to the participants in the ecstatic rituals, and came to feel that he himself was achieving a deep level of wisdom that he did not possess at the outset of the relationship. This is an experience other ethnographers have also had with some of their informants.)

True, Reichel-Dolmatoff gave colored pencils and other drawing materials to the Desana and asked them to draw and explain their yajé-induced visions and certain symbols that apparently recur with some regularity in yajé trance states, and that have become an integral part of the artistic repertoire of the culture. But even though the materials were of alien origin, the recording of yajé motifs, alone and in combination, on different flat surfaces, including the walls of houses, or on pottery vessels, and public discussion of the significance of these motifs, were well within the indigenous tradition; in any event, this aspect of Reichel-Dolmatoff's fieldwork is brilliantly presented, with reproductions of the native drawings in full color, in his latest book, *Beyond the Milky Way*. It is art history of a very different kind, and a major new contribution not only to the growing corpus of authoritative literature on botanical hallucinogens in their cultural context but also to the study of "primitive" art. Here again, as in his earlier work, what emerges from the writings of Reichel-Dolmatoff is the richness of culture as a whole that by and

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large characterized the published volumes of earlier fieldworkers who came to anthropology from the natural and physical sciences, and who were constrained neither by limitations of time nor by academic straightjackets, and who were, above all, respectful and insatiably curious.

If there is one problem with Reichel-Dolmatoff's work it is a certain sexual imbalance. The intellectual culture of the Desana sometimes appears Freudian beyond even Freud's fondest dreams, inasmuch as almost everything is sexually-related. But the problem with this is that a feminine point of view is singularly lacking. One would like to know, for example, whether the women also see everything in such sex-charged terms, and what they themselves have to say about the taboos that are taken so seriously by the men. Women do not participate directly in the yajé rituals, i.e., they do not themselves drink the powerful hallucinogenic brew and thus do not share directly in the yajé visions. It is thus the men, not the women, who receive supernatural confirmation of the validity of the culture and its symbols. How does this affect their attitudes? One would like to know how the women view the ecstatic-visionary experience and to hear this from the women's own mouths; what little we get of the women's viewpoint is largely filtered through male informants or the ethnographer's observations of overt behavior.

This imbalance plagues much ethnographic field research. It is, in fact, inherent in the practice of sending students of one or the other sex into situations where, as a rule, the female sphere is closed to males, and the male to females. This might be corrected if ethnographers go into the field as male-female teams, because areas normally closed to one sex or the other tend to open up, at least partially, when the investigator is perceived as a member of a family unit.

These reservations aside, Reichel-Dolmatoff works in the great tradition of anthropology. Above all, he appreciates the role of ideology, or mental life. But for him it is not just ideology influencing daily life, but a far more complex process of reciprocal interaction between ideology, mental life (both waking and in ecstatic-visionary trances), environment, economics, social structure, the enculturation of the young, technology, the arts and crafts, conservation of scarce natural resources, and so on. The implication is that where these interrelationships are not recognized, culture is distorted. This is not to say that it is wrong per se to focus on one or another aspect—e.g., a market system, or hunting technology. But it must be acknowledged that in doing so, the aspect so selected tends to become artificially isolated from the other cultural elements with which it is interdependent and which, indeed, make it possible to exist in the first place. A beautiful example of this vital interdependence in Reichel-Dolmatoff's kind of ethnography is his account, in *Amazonian Cosmos* and elsewhere, of the replenishing of the energy

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cycle of the natural environment through the exchange, in the shaman's hallucinatory yajé trance, of the souls of taboo violators for game animals belonging to the supernatural "master of animals" of the Vaupés region. The Desana are acutely aware of the danger of overhunting and seek to assure continued balance between their needs and the environmental possibilities by supernatural means. Hunting is thus as much a matter of ideological determinants as of economic ones.

Undoubtedly, the isolationist tendency and lack of attention to ideology and religion, and their impact on the cultural whole in much of modern ethnography, are the result not just of academic training, but of enculturation from an early age into—and unconscious acceptance of the values of—a secular and highly technologized society fascinated with economics, innovation, change, specialization, energy input and output, and what has come to be known in social science jargon as "adaptive strategies." Unlike psychoanalysts, who must undergo intense self-examination before interpreting the minds of others, anthropologists, with few exceptions, are ill-prepared by their training to turn the eye inward and ask the nature and sources of their own preoccupations. Even the simplest and stablest native culture must have an economic dimension and over millenia it must experience change and innovation. But this is not necessarily the salient feature or concern of such a culture. On the contrary, the prime concern may be and often is—especially today—the preservation of traditional ways and values and the minimization of the impact of change from the outside, even where such change is seen to offer economic benefits. A friend, the late Eva Hunt, once told us of an experience among the Cuicatec of Oaxaca, a people with wide mercantile interests. As she kept asking questions of the women about their market system and trading patterns, they would patiently but insistently reply, "But Eva, that is not important. *This* is important, write this down," and proceed to speak of their beliefs and, in some instances, of the sacred nature of things.

No doubt, Reichel-Dolmatoff's European background has had a profound influence on his concern and respect for native intellectual attainment. In this he is the heir to a long and honorable list of Americanists of European intellectual heritage or education whose major concern has been the ideological universe of the indigenous peoples of the New World: among others, Boas, Kroeber, Lowie, Preuss, Hultkrantz, Schultze Jena, Lévi-Strauss, Rasmussen, W. Müller, Wilbert, and some of their American students come to mind. In the European intellectual tradition, ideas are important and are capable, like faith, of moving mountains. While the European intellectual tradition is worlds removed from that of native Americans, an educational system that takes its own ideas seriously would better prepare the anthropologist to take the ideas

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of others seriously as well. In comparison, our own system of higher education stresses method and theory. Is it, then, realistic to expect serious and respectful concern with native ideologies and intellectual culture on the order of the contributions of a Reichel-Dolmatoff where the educational system that produced the ethnographer places so little value on its own intellectual heritage? How many recent Ph.D.s in anthropology have read Plato's *Republic*, or even the major works of the founders of their own discipline?

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