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## Um peixe olhou para mim: O povo Yudjá e a perspectiva

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## BOOK REVIEWS

***Um peixe olhou para mim: O povo Yudjá e a perspectiva.* Tânia Stolze Lima. Rio de Janeiro: UNESP. 2005. 400 pp. R\$ 49.00.**

**ISBN : 8571396221; ISBN 13 : 9788571396227.**

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*A fish looked at me: the Yudjá people and perspective.* How on earth do you review a book as brilliant as this? My initial response to this question is the simple suggestion that you read it. And if you cannot understand Portuguese, either learn it, or find a translator. That translator will not be me, because I cannot even review it.

But that initial response won't reach the word limit of the acceptable review so I will have to try again. I take heart from a great thinker, Joni Mitchell, when she responded to Charles Mingus' request to set *The Four Quartets* to his music, "I would sooner summarize *The Old Testament*". That is, the invitation is deeply gratifying, but the task is probably impossible. That said, here goes...

Slowly and steadily, step by careful step, this book leads the reader up to a statement and a question. The statement is Yudjá and the question is anthropological. The statement is "Strong manioc beer is human", and the question is, "How could this statement possibly make sense to the people who make it?" This conclusion is deceptively simple. Surely, isn't that just Anthropology 101? Well, yes, but in anthropology, as in music and in life itself, you need to know how to get back home.

The author of this book is very knowledgeable about anthropology, and very respectful of its actual history. An earlier ethnographer of the Yudjá, then known as the Juruna, was Karl von den Steinen. Steinen is probably best known today as the ethnographer who first recorded the Bororo statement, "We are red macaws", a statement that has led to a lot of anthropological thought and writing. In a remarkable article, Christopher Crocker tried to end this debate by setting this statement in a brief attempt to describe the fullness of Bororo people's lives.

It did not work. In his renowned article, "On apparently irrational beliefs", Dan Sperber correctly, if somewhat snootily, responded that Crocker's ethnographic exposition still depended on a concept that we do not ordinarily accept as existent, "spirits". Sperber counter poses Crocker's attempt at explanation of the Bororo statement to a clearly irrational belief held by Gamo people in Dorze in southern Ethiopia. The belief is in dragons. Sperber persuasively argues that anthropology will never become a serious science as long as it remains bogged down in ethnographic detail.

But is that so? Christina Toren commented to me, in her flat in London, "The problem with that argument of Sperber's is that it runs against everything that Malinowski showed us how to do. After all, any statement taken totally out of context looks irrational." What, then, do dragons mean to Gamo people? In a bizarre coincidence worthy of Shakespeare, some years after that conversation, Christina and I found ourselves in Chenchá, two miles from Dorze, listening to the elders discussing what exactly a dragon might be. None of them had ever seen one, although one thought that he had once heard one. All agreed that dragons lived far away, in the hot lowlands, and seldom came near them. Their accounts suggested to me that they were discussing some kind of large python. Pythons, no matter how unfamiliar, are not apparently irrational beliefs.

This world, the old Gamo people were saying, is much larger and stranger than we habitually think. Lima's book gives a perfect example of this, when she describes the fate of what seems to have been a hapless young osprey attempting to find a breeding territory and a mate, a potential lived world. This young osprey, if it was one, strayed into the Yudjá lived world, where it met a fate that nobody, not even the Yudjá people, could have predicted. We do not know what the world is like, we have to experience it.

The whole point of this book, and about good anthropology, is that we cannot really explain statements like, "Strong manioc beer is human". Every attempt thus far at explanation is simply an explaining away. To attempt to explain exactly what another human being means by what he or she says is like trying to summarize the Old Testament. It is beyond human powers, and therefore not even worth attempting. What this book, and what anthropology in all its genuine grandeur, shows is that you can only describe this world by raising all of your own profound doubts about whether or not you are describing it accurately. I guess the key point of anthropology is a question raised in any genuine conversation, as the interlocutor's face begins to register a nascent confusion, and you seek to keep it on the right track. You say, poised between hope and despair, "Do you know what I mean?"

The book opens with a quotation from Montaigne's essay, "On Drunkenness". The quotation is apposite in two ways, for beer is central to Yudjá life, and beer, wine or their cousins are both the great facilitators and great confusers of conversation. Montaigne was right, for the world is indeed all variation and dissimilarity. "On drunkenness" is a foundational text for anthropology, if an unfamiliar one. Lima's quotation is also extremely artful, for it silently elicits in the reader's mind another of Montaigne's essays, "On the Cannibals", which is rather more often spoken about by anthropologists. But this book very cleverly points out what is wrong with anthropology's reliance on this latter essay. Anthropology has historically been written by people who wear breeches and do not eat people about people who, on the whole, don't and do. Anthropology is, as Sperber has beautifully shown, a search for similarity and invariance. But, as great ethnography constantly replies, that is just a hope, not a fact. *In vino veritas*.

So, how on earth do you review a book like this, I ask myself again. Well, I was wandering through Coyoacán with my friend Magnus Course, both of us somewhat frazzled by a visit to the Trotsky house. We found a street market selling books, and bibliophiles both, we fell to browsing. I found a scholarly study of my beloved Nezahualcóyotl, the poet king of Texcoco. I bought it, because I believe that Nezahualcóyotl said the most beautiful thing about books that has ever been written in one. Back at my hotel, I opened it and found the following remarkable preview of the book so ineptly reviewed here:

*Estoy embriagado, lloro, me aflijo,  
pienso, digo,  
en mi interior lo encuentro:  
si yo nunca muriera,  
si nunca desapareciera.  
Allá donde no hay muerte,  
allá donde ella es conquistada,  
que allá vaya yo.  
Si yo nunca muriera,  
si yo nunca desapareciera.*