

1977

A PERSONAL VISION of A MORE
MEANINGFUL ANTHROPOLOGY (A Review
of *Personal and Extrapersonal Vision in Anthropology*
by Robert Jay)

David C. Dominik
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebanthro>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Dominik, David C., "A PERSONAL VISION of A MORE MEANINGFUL ANTHROPOLOGY (A Review of *Personal and Extrapersonal Vision in Anthropology* by Robert Jay)" (1977). *Nebraska Anthropologist*. 139.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebanthro/139>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Nebraska Anthropologist by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A PERSONAL VISION
of
A MORE MEANINGFUL ANTHROPOLOGY

by

David C. Dominik

Robert Jay, "Personal and Extrapersonal Vision" in
Anthropology". In: Reinventing Anthropology,
D. Hymes, (ed.). New York: Vintage Books. 1974.

In an unpublished paper presented to the AAA Annual meeting in 1969, Robin Ridington discusses "The Anthropology of Experience" (also the title). The paper relates the story of Jumping Mouse, a not-so-ordinary field mouse. Jumping Mouse leaves his brothers to satisfy his curiosity about the rushing sound in his head. The story makes special note that Jumping Mouse can see only a short distance ahead of himself as he travels, the philosophical implication being that he has limited vision. Curiosity becomes a quest after Jumping Mouse sees the rushing river; he strives to reach the sacred mountains way off in the distance. Along the way he encounters several guides; two of them are ill. In each case the medicine that will make them well (and will enable them to guide Jumping Mouse to his goal) is a mouse's eye. Even though it means arriving at his destination blind, Jumping Mouse gives his eyes to his "brothers". Alone and unable to see, Jumping Mouse waits beside the mountain lake for the end. He is certain he will be the victim of the "spots", the eagles overhead. Suddenly there is an impact and Jumping Mouse can see. He can see farther and further as he soars higher and higher. Jumping Mouse shouts, "Hello, brother frog" and his friend shouts back, "Hello, brother eagle".

Ridington applies the moral to anthropology when he says"

"...if anthropology really seeks to understand how experience is organized in other cultures, how experience encounters meaning it will have to recognize other perspectives than its own intellectualistic one. It will have to open itself to the perspectives of non-Western philosophy. In accepting these gifts from the people we study we will be able to see ourselves and our experience as anthropologists in a different light and as a result write better

(sic) more meaningful anthropology. We are all mice but if we give our eyes to our guides, the people we study, we too can become eagles". (29)

If we allow ourselves to take a different perspective, if we let the people we study show us what is important to them, we will have a better anthropology. If we relate ourselves differently to the people we study, we will be able to see ourselves differently and, therefore, write more meaningfully.

Robert Jay makes a similar point in his essay "Personal and Extrapersonal Vision in Anthropology" (1974). What he says "is that the relationships we form with the subjects of our work - for whatever reasons we settle upon those relationships - control the kind of knowledge that the material we gain will yield..." (372)

Jay begins his essay by stating that participant observation involves a "forked, 'have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too' relationship" and that this can affect the "yields of knowledge often sought by anthropologists" (368). Citing R. D. Laing, Jay then says that the manner in which we relate to people as persons is very different from the manner in which we relate to them as organisms. Such different relationships, he says, will yield different types of knowledge. The problem with his anthropological training, he implies, is that it conditioned him to look for patterned behavior in his subjects. Though he acknowledges the need to perceive such patterns, Jay also points out that he was seeing behavior in those terms to the detriment of the people. Not only was he beginning to see people as so many organisms in a system, but also he was ignoring non-patterned behavior and neglecting to ask how the people related such patterns to their own lives.

At this point, Jay brings forth a single example of what he is saying. This, I feel, is the weak point of the essay. Ruben Reina (1954) perceived certain patterns of behavior in the interactions of the people he studied. Eric Wolf (1966) developed a theory of friendship and applied it to Reina's information, using Reina's two separate communities as generating the two types of friendship, emotional and instrumental.

The problem, as Jay sees it, is that Reina and his wife strived to maintain a personal distance from their subjects and succeeded in doing so. According to Jay, this skewed the knowledge they derived from their study. Though he says he probably would have done the same thing, he says that a study of interpersonal interaction (friendship) demands relating to one's subjects as persons, not as people in a system of patterned behavior.

Jay's main fault occurs in his reference to Wolf. Unjustly, I feel, he accuses Wolf of formulating his ideas to

support his ideas. Specifically, he has chosen one phrase and used it out of context thus resulting in a negative connotation of Wolf's work.

Wolf says that "in solidary groupings like communities and lineages...friendship can at best provide emotional release and catharsis from the strains and pressures of role-playing"(11). He refers to a complimentary arrangement where friends compensate for each other's emotional deficits. Using Reina's information, Wolf then suggests the type of community that would generate such friendships. Jay then takes Wolf's words and edits them for his own ideas. As a result, he says, the

"kind of community one would expect to find such personal deficits (Jay's term, not Wolf's) generated ...is in highly solidary communities, where the emotional expression of each individual in his relations with others is severely cramped by 'the strains and pressures of role-playing'" (370-1).

In Wolf's words, friendship provides a release for "strains and pressures", but in Jay's words, friendship is inhibited by the "strains and pressures."

Further, where Wolf uses his friendship model as a building block, Jay cites it as a focal point by taking it out of context. Such negligence detracts from Jay's example, but fortunately does not negate his central idea.

Jay goes on to cite a field problem encountered by Clifford Geertz (1968). Briefly, Geertz experienced a breakdown in his relationship with an informant. Jay chides Geertz for attempting to explain the split in terms of a theory of culture. Rather, he says, a theory of persons would have been much more appropriate for an explanation. The "realm of knowledge" Jay feels he would "be able to explore" by choosing "with full awareness, to relate to my subjects fully as persons...is a realm for which the concept of culture, and for that matter of social structure, ecology and the like (extrapersonal bases for explaining behavior) are only of peripheral value" (375).

Before relating a field experience he had in a Malay village, Jay complains of the difficulty he has in resolving a conflict. The problem is incorporating the knowledge he acquires about people as individual persons into his professional writing. My own experience has been similar. In my field work, part of my day was spent "hanging out" at a local gas station. During the time spent there I would conduct informal interviews with patrons and employees. For several days I had the peculiar feeling that one particular employee was rather indifferent to me. I experienced a change in this "relationship" when the person took the time to tell me that he was going across the street to get a pack of cigarettes. His words were significant to me because they

marked a change in his attitude towards me. By showing concern to explain his actions, it was as if he were saying, "I'll be back in a minute, friend. The problem is the same as with Jay: when it came time to write up my paper, there was no room, no place, for this remembered experience.

Jay's experience occurred when he was asked by some Malay villagers to give them some advice about dealing with their problems as he saw them. At the end of his talk Jay sensed a feeling of indifference in his audience, as if his "advice (had not) made much sense to them". (379).

His solution to this experience and to the problem of combining personal and professional writing is to

"place first a mutual responsibility to my whole self and to those I go to learn from, in agreement with my desire to relate to them as full equals, personal and intellectual. I shall try to use my relationships with them to find out what topics are relevant to each of us, to be investigated through what questions and what modes of questioning, and for what kinds of knowledge. I should like to make the first report for them, in fact with them..." (379)

To suggest that the problem with anthropology today is what Jay admits to as having been his problem would be a sweeping generalization. A counter-example that comes to mind is the anthropologist who was commended by the major of a Swiss village for her seeing his people "with the eyes of her heart". It was evident to him that she related to the people as persons because it showed in her writing. His compliment is one which each of us would like to receive from the people we study.

I strongly feel that if - as Jay suggests - we relate to others as persons and treat them as equals, if we give our eyes to our guides - as Ridington says - we will have a better and more meaningful anthropology.

REFERENCES

- Reina, Ruben
1954 "Two Patterns of Friendship in a Guatemalan Community". American Anthropologist 61:44-50.
- Ridington, Robin
1969 Unpublished paper presented to the AAA Annual Meeting. New Orleans, Louisiana.
- Wolf, Eric R.
1966 "Kinship, Friendship, and Patron-Client Relations in Complex Societies". In The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies, ed. M. Banton. Association of Social Anthropologists Monograph No. 4. London: Tavistock Publications.