

*Visayan Vignettes: Ethnographic Traces of a Philippine Island.* By Jean-Paul Dumont. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Pp. xxii, 226, with maps and illustrations.

The crisis of representation has particularly interesting consequences for anthropology and other disciplines whose concerns include the study of foreign cultures or societies. The representation of the Other is becoming increasingly problematic in a world characterized by a global order where the local no longer possesses the autonomy of isolation. This isolation also allowed a discipline such as anthropology to speak about its subjects without their express authorization. Or to be more precise, where their express authorization did not enter into the discourse about themselves. These Others could be spoken about in their absence.

Jean-Paul Dumont's *Visayan Vignettes* is an extremely well-written account of his field-work in the island of Siquijor, a place which is far more prosaic than its notoriety for its witches suggests. Dumont's description of his stay on the island evokes warm images of simple fishing folk struggling to gain a living amidst increasingly difficult circumstances. Writing in the style of the new ethnography, he is deliberately self-conscious about rhetorical effects and rejects any attempts at a totalizing discourse. The result is a very engaging impressionistic portrait of an outsider's attempts to convey the relationships experienced in Siquijor. This portrait is as revealing of the new ethnography's concern with self-reflection as it is of the "Others" of which it speaks or writes.

Dumont purposefully organizes his account around short descriptions of his central characters, including brief historical and geographical sketches, origin myths, genealogies, and a comment on the presentational role of love for the constitution of Siquijorian society. With its nuanced exploration of local life, the study could almost be mistaken for an ethnographic novel were it not for the copious inclusion of Cebuano words and kinship charts indicating the complex worlds and genealogical ties among its inhabitants. These authorial signposts remind us that we are dealing with an anthropological account of field-work rather than the loose interpretations of a work of fiction.

While we are not sure and are never told the purpose of this study, beyond a vague admission of being seduced by the island's name and as a form of field-work apology that the book is about fishermen and farmers, what emerges is a sensitive account of a group of subsistence peasants and their relationships with the local élite. Patently aware of his cultural limitations, Dumont nevertheless provides us with what he regards as a balanced account of local society. His preferences are clearly with the poor villagers rather than with the town élite with whom he appears to have difficulty relating, partly because they show so little interest in his work. The study revolves around Auntie Diding, an interesting and formidable woman whom anyone familiar with the Philippines would instantly recognize as a combination of the best qualities of Cory and Imelda (that is, a solid common sense combined with a simplistic religiosity and a mischievous creativity), in other words, the *mater familia*, which constitutes Philippine society.

Dumont spent a year living in this small and rural Siquijorian fishing village. During this time he befriended and was accepted into the kin-group of his main informants, which included some townspeople as well as rural villagers. Besides exploring the intimate relationships in village life, including ambiguous ties with the town élite, Dumont offers us a glimpse of his characters' main activities — fishing, farming, petty trading — as well as the vagaries of rural life resulting in the ups and downs of personal and family fortunes. Some of these sketches or vignettes such as a brief history of the island and of its geography are deceptively simple but would have required considerable patience and scholarly perseverance to reconstruct. A short description of a minor and inconsequential earthquake is a compelling and masterful discussion of the role of myth as an unsatisfactory but nevertheless essential attempt at making sense of an often contradictory world. A perfect example of serendipity both in its meaning and setting, the earthquake opens up channels of inquiry hitherto unavailable. Only when the routine of life is unexpectedly interrupted do we come across conscious attempts at legitimation, revealing unstated expectations and rationalizations. Dumont takes full advantage of this event, showing how minor dramas may take on major responses in situations where the tensions of every-

day life are either ignored or denied.

While Dumont provides some very revealing portraits of Siquijorian life, other aspects of local society remain vague. Dumont had more access to senior adults than to younger people, which may explain why his sketches of youth are relatively poorly developed. There is some awkwardness in describing the costs of living in the field, including what appears to be extremely favourable circumstances for employing domestic help. The situation both reflects and parodies the ethnographic enterprise. A researcher with limited funds wishes to establish himself/herself in the field for a considerable time and develop intimate relations with informants. Unaware of local conventions and in the absence of a well-defined cash economy, the situation is open to misunderstanding and exploitation. Most field-workers do not intend to stay for longer than is necessary to collect their data, while the natives hope to involve newcomers in their complex networks of exchange. Dumont is caught in this common difficulty and rather than appear naively over-generous describes a situation where everyone profits equally. If one is crude enough to ask what the natives got out of his presence, the answer is a basketball. In contrast, the ethnographer is justly overwhelmed with guilt over the generosity of the natives. Unfortunately, other field-workers are probably even less concerned with notions of equal or moral exchange than is Dumont.

Despite the many good features of this ethnography there are glaring gaps in the account. These range from the conventional anthropological expectations of descriptions of rituals and other symbolic structures to more sociological aspects such as class, politics, and the economy. Although it is pleasant to read a well-written ethnographic account without having to deal with reams of arid data and often meaningless ritual transcriptions, Dumont provides unexpected details such as the various meanings of the *legua*, a Spanish measure of length, some original Spanish texts or even the average size of farms over time, but he is curiously silent about the demographic composition of his village or the class structure of the municipality. There seems to be no pattern for the provision of information. This difficulty is linked to the lack of discussion regarding the purpose of the study and its relationship to a broader

research agenda. Despite the presence of theoretical references, there is no discussion of the Philippine ethnographic literature except for the occasional mention of a local source. It is as though a Philippine anthropological corpus to which Dumont might care to contribute from the perspective of his Siquijor experience did not exist.

The text ends with a long discussion of the nature of love (*gugma*) in Siquijor or rather it ends with an explication of *gugma*'s linguistic usage. Drawing on the lyrics of a popular Cebuano song, local poetry, and the provincial anthem, Dumont explores the semantic construction of love. A discussion of the emotions largely absent in earlier ethnography has become a common topic in recent investigations. Renato and Michelle Rosaldo dealt with it extensively in their study of the Ilongot but Dumont ignores their work, as he does Kiefer's discussion of violence among the Tausog. For someone with Dumont's evident scholarly thoroughness this neglect must be intended and part of his method of a "principled impressionism". Unfortunately, this principle only works if one is aware of a broader context within which vague brushstrokes evoke a moving image of an already recognizable scene. In this case Dumont's impressions of Siquijor presume an awareness of current anthropological concerns with reflectivity and the critique of objective reason. It also presumes a close familiarity with the vagaries of Philippine life for the reader to be able to separate insight from banality. An informed reader will appreciate Dumont's insights and nuanced interpretations but I expect that most readers unfamiliar with rural Philippine life will misconstrue his impressions. One possible source of misinterpretation is the tranquil and pastoral picture of Siquijorian society portrayed by Dumont, which includes a prissy sexuality. "Siquijor is an island of gentle beauty where we form one whole big family" was how the natives described the island and themselves to Dumont. This view was particularly espoused by the town élite who wanted to project an image of their island more suitable for a holiday commercial and who were pragmatically motivated by an interest in tourism. Dumont explores the validity of such a view, showing how kinship is as often conveniently forgotten as it is invoked. However, the overall impression gained from his account is of a peaceful island where conflict is subtly

expressed so as to cause a minimum of embarrassment, where people make jokes about witches while simultaneously believing in them and where sexuality is hidden beneath a cloak of shyness and propriety. Apart from a man bashing his old mother for switching the radio off, there is no mention of overt violence in the text. Despite Siquijor's reputation for witchcraft, Dumont fails to discuss its significance except in the context of a practical joke aimed at himself. The theme of sexuality rarely enters the text and people, except when drunk, are too shy to discuss it openly. And yet Dumont mentions the often pragmatic attitude to sexual arrangements made in the village, including hints of bisexuality. But all of this is implied rather than made explicit. Anyone vaguely familiar with the Philippines will immediately recognize the partiality of such an impression even if a closer familiarity would also confirm its veracity. It is almost as if Dumont wants to confirm the official Siquijorian view of themselves, particularly in the context of their neighbours who largely ignore the island or assume it to be a den of witches. In this latter sense, Dumont's account counterbalances ethnographies detailing rampant violence, dysfunctional beliefs, or exotic sexualities. Siquijorians emerge as a dignified people struggling with their poverty but still managing to lead meaningfully rich lives, gracious and generous to a fault and perhaps over-accommodating, since they never appear to misbehave in the presence of the anthropologist. This is an enjoyable ethnography even if I remain sceptical of the conceptual gains of its approach. Others have written ethnographies of Philippine society employing engaging narrative styles such as S. Griffiths' (*Emigrants, Entrepreneurs and Evil-Spirits: Life in a Philippine Village* [1988]) recent account of a village in Ilocos famous for its emigrants and its garlic. Dumont's approach differs from Griffiths' in that he intersperses the narrative with theoretical excursions or reflective asides, whereas Griffiths is more inclined to let the story unfold uninterruptedly. Anthropologists have always found it difficult to balance the power of an engaging narrative versus the equally insistent demand to present data. Griffiths' ethnography succumbs totally to the first approach while Dumont attempts to deal with both. Dumont is, however, only partially successful and his interrupting asides often get in the way of the narra-

tive or the data. One cannot help but get the impression that Dumont is writing for the devotees of currently fashionable ethnography rather than for his fellow Filipinists or the broader anthropological reader, to say nothing about a Filipino readership.

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