

RESENHAS

PARALLEL WORLDS. AN ANTHROPOLOGIST AND A WRITER ENCOUNTER AFRICA, BY ALMA GOTTLIEB AND PHILIP GRAHAM, NEW YORK, CROWN PUBLICITY, 1993, 324 PAGES.

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Parallel worlds is a remarkable account of a deepening encounter between multiple universes. Gottlieb, a cultural anthropologist, hose to do her fieldwork among the Beng. She and her husband, a fiction writer, decided to live for about a year in a Beng small village in the tropical rain forest of Côte d'Ivoire. The book is a memorial account of their stay among the Beng. Gottlieb and Graham reveal not only the knowledge they acquired about the Beng, but also how they captured this knowledge in sharing the Beng's daily lifes, the emotions and the problems they experiment.

The authors who combine a double perspective, anthropological and literary, invite us to embark on a trip, not always easy but surely fascinating, through the Beng's daily universe. Their narrative begins with a description of their arrival and short stay in Abidjan, the capital city which serves as stage for describing an amazing Africa. On the one hand, gaining an authorisation for a scientific research appears almost impossible: the organization and the functioning of the bureaucracy remains incomprehensible to the foreigners and everything seems slow, in disorder and inaccessible. On the other hand, tasks generally difficult in most countries, such as finding someone who could be a contact in the village or spotting a place where to live out there in the village, are easily accomplished by people to whom you have just been introduced. The real rhythm of things and the way to do them appear often opposed to the expectations created by the foreign universe of rules and values.

Via the account of their visits to markets and of their drive to the Beng land we progressively discover the elegance of the women, the magnificent colors of their *pagnes*, the unforgettable smell of millions of spices mixed to those of

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tropical fruits and the taste of the African food. Slowly, and as the authors get deeper into the country, the reader feels himself surrounded by that universe full of exoticism and of contradictions, where misery and luxury side paradoxically together, where the prescriptions of the Koran and the African rhythm are in order to celebrate the Tabasky.

Their arrival to the Beng villages of Asangbé and Kosangbé is marked by a friendly reception, but as well by a non hidden mistrust. Their lack of knowledge of the local language and the difficulties created by the mediation of an interpreter have been aggravating factors that did not help them to overcome the villagers' resistance, at least during the initial period of their stay.

The authors deliver an honest account of their processual encounter and dynamic learning through repetitive errors from their first contact with the Beng's universe that turned to be their daily life but that has always been impenetrable and completely unknown.

As they live in the village and life in village keep going in spite of them, Gottlieb and Graham started little by little to participate to the African network of favors and obligations; they received and got in touch with people who came everyday to their door in search of medicines for all sorts of sickness and more than once they drove urgent cases to the health center. The gratitude, the share of affliction, pain and joy formed the terrain where closer relations between the Beng and their visitors are build up.

Through the authors' descriptions of their daily life, the current events and the ways they faced these events, and of the emotions they felt we begin to penetrate into the universe of the Beng. The description of each personage makes us proximate to a culture that realized itself differently according to the socio-structural position of each one. Progressively, the different characters and the relations among them introduce us to a complex network of social relations and social rules.

Birth, marriage and death are highlighted by the authors as paramount moments during which the Beng universe of conceptions, rules and rituals are dramatized but also as events particularly significant for the individuals and either lived with joy or pain.

The narrative account puts us gradually in contact with the invisible world of the spirits that surround all the village life. Their presence is felt in different situations: in the interactions among men, in the conflicts that break out among them, when they neglect their ritual obligations, when they are sick or have problems to face. The recourse to the divine permits the communication between

the visible and invisible worlds, mediatizes the conflicts between men and the spirits, and opens space to the regulation of problematic situations.

The work of A. Gottlieb and P. Graham is characterized by respect, by an acute perception, a rare sensibility and solid honesty. From the very beginning the authors clarify the vantage point from which they speak; they situate themselves both as professionals and as individuals: Gottlieb as an anthropologist and Graham as a writer and both of them as an American couple with all their cultural background are led to build up and narrate their encounter with the Beng. Such position generates in readers essential questions about the performance of fieldwork: the contradictions emerging in an encounter between persons belonging to different cultures, the difficulty to share foreign values and ethical conceptions, the necessity of recognizing one's own limits and the inner transformations undertaken by the encounter itself.

We need such pieces of work. We find here not only a combination of anthropological and literary constructs but more fundamentally a narrative that bridges parallel worlds.