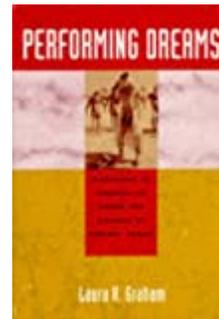




Laura R. Graham. *Performing Dreams: Discourses of Immortality among the Xavante of Central Brazil.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. xiv + 304 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-72776-2.



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Performing Dreams

In this work, *Performing Dreams*, Laura R. Graham, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Iowa, seeks to describe the till recently often overlooked phenomena of dreams and their role in maintaining a peoples' culture. In this case, the people are the *Xavante* of central Brazil, part of the Ge linguistic family, a group which only came into sporadic contact with modern Brazil in the 1930s and again, permanently, from 1946 onward.

Graham attempts to accomplish two major goals with this work, the culmination of a ten-year period of field work (three years continuous, 1985-1987) beginning in 1982 and focused on the Xavante settlement of Pimental Barbosa, Tocantins, Brazil. The first goal is the creative reappropriation of contemporary works on performance and linguistics (in particular those by and stemming from Charles S. Peirce, Richard Schechner, and Greg Urban) in an attempt to uncover how language is used in the performance of dreams to sustain the Xavante culture as it continues to face the shocks of modernity. Graham's argument is that the Xavante themselves are not passive actors, but rather active participants in continuously

re-creating their past in order to confront the present. In this task, Graham is fortunate in being able to draw on, develop, and in some cases correct, the work of earlier researchers and friends of the Xavante, in particular David and Pia Maybury-Lewis, Nancy Flowers, and Aracy Lopes da Silva (these and others gratefully acknowledged in the preface).

The second goal is, in a sense, more personal in that Graham, in publishing this book, (see pp. 224-225) discharges an obligation laid upon her by her principal informant and indeed "adopted" father, *Warodi*, son of *Apowe* the leader under whom the Xavante first made peaceful contact with white people. This obligation is to publish the dream songs transmitted to the anthropologist, by Warodi himself, who believed that these contain the narrative of the creation of the world and of the Xavante, and that their transmission and indeed thereby retelling will ensure that others will always know of the Xavante, their dreams, their pre-eminence, and of their dream teller, Warodi.

After providing the historical and theoretical matrix for her argument, Graham focuses on close anal-

yses of Warodi's songs in differing settings (informal and formal), indicating how, through the creative on-going re-composing of the songs, the boundaries of the (individual) self shift as the singer's self and then the tribe are identified with the Immortals/Creators (chapter 6, "Becoming a Creator"). The book concludes with the author's self-reflective process of coming to understand Warodi, his songs and their function in present-day Brazil (chapter 7, "Performing the Dream"). For through this work, also, Warodi continues "always living," for in yet another re-telling, the immortality of the storyteller(s) will be ensured.

How is the primary goal achieved? Graham's thesis is provocative. She argues that despite assumptions to the contrary, tradition is in continuous change (p. 9) and it is this that enables cultural survival for the Xavante. This Graham demonstrates ably through both a close textual analysis of Warodi's "performing dreams" and through situating these within specific historical and spatial stages. Performing dreams, which give the title to this work, are described in the Introduction (chapter 1) as performances, (in the examples narrated here, orchestrated by Warodi), which recounted Warodi's participation in a gathering of immortals, including the ancestors who created the Xavante. These ancestors, according to Warodi, gave him songs, and by performing these, the Xavante (and, ultimately, Warodi himself) would attain immortality.

The notable element of these performances is, as Graham realised, their polyvocality. For Warodi was not just reporting what the creators narrated to him, but was including both his own present voice and the voices of the Xavante elders participating in the dream performance. It seems that, unlike the individuated Western conception of the self, the boundaries of self and community (both of the present and of the past, represented by the ancestors) are much more fluid in Xavante culture. Performance discourse is not understood as emanating from a single self, but rather as a production, communally constructed by many voices. This is true not only of the formal "performing of dreams," but also of the mens' regular village councils (*Wara*), which Graham carefully analyses in chapter 5 ("Depersonalizing the Dream: The Politics of Narrative Performance.")

The dream analyses are set within the events of the wider Brazilian social and political context in chapter 2 ("Descendants of the First Creators"), which traces the history of the Xavante in historical times from the seventeenth century through to 1988 and updated in an epi-

logue to 1994. This external history, as it were, has witnessed the compression of Xavante living space, the greater fragmentation of tribal unity, and the rapid acquisition of the trappings of modern consumerist society. Yet Graham claims that "despite the magnitude of these events, the Xavante maintain an invincible sense of identity and feeling of control over the historical process." (p. 23) and again and again a "firm sense of self" (pp. 55 passim). This self, understood of course in a broader sense as including the communal, is preserved through their "connectedness with the past...[which] underlies their sense of self" (p. 63). This is a strong claim for the power of an oral culture, one which surely rests not just on the "performing dreams." For Graham admits the significance of linkage to external groups (FUNAI, CIMI, NGO's) for the Xavante's survival, though these linkages have brought competition and division in their wake. Warodi's dream performances reflect and express a desire for being and communal unity which is already in grave danger.

Chapters 3 ("Sounds of Time, the Time of Sounds"), 4 ("Singing Dreams, Dreams of Singing"), and 5 ("Depersonalizing the Dream") contain the theoretical center of the book, advancing the argument that social space is created and distinguished through multiple soundings (chapter 3), that dream performances are multi-vocal narratives in that Warodi permits others to contribute to the narrative's construction as a deliberate political act (chapter 4), and that Xavante society is a "strikingly literal institutionalization of Bakhtin's polyvocality" (chapter 5, p. 141). In particular, chapter 5 contains Graham's reworking of accepted Western conceptions of personal and individual ratiocinity (as exemplified in the works of Jurgen Habermas) through using Bakhtin's understanding of narrative as dialogical, polyvocal, and as the product of discursive interaction. Instead of assuming the Western individualized self, Graham's work among the Xavante leads her instead to view discourse as the consequence of dialogic interaction. Thus Graham questions the common assumption that "autonomous selves" produce speech independently of social constructions. This is not as unusual as it might appear, as Graham finds analogies to the Xavante "communal selves" in the work of Michael Warner and, historically, in the seventeenth-century religious sect of Quakers. The Quakers, through their dependence upon the directives of a Divine Other through the many, reveal parallels (p. 143) reflecting "depersonalised discourse," which Graham claims reflects a "principle of anonymity" (what Michael Warner, in *The Letters of the Republic* [1990], calls the "principle of negativity"). According to Graham, this "decoupling [of] in-

dividual authorship from speech is arguably a factor that helps create egalitarian relations” (p. 145).

However, despite Graham’s analysis of the (superior?) values of the Xavante “fluid selves,” there seem to be strong factional and leadership struggles in Xavante society. This the author admits (pp. 149-152) and, though arguing that the communal councils (*Wara*) serve through their multivocality to deepen anonymity and to overcome factionalism, they still have not prevented divisions (p. 149).

Graham’s contribution to the literature on the Ge and the Xavante in particular is significant. This work examines, analyzes, and draws out the distinctives of an orality that is all too often overlooked in anthropological works, whether through lack of time, lack of linguistic ability, or lack of training in musicology and linguistics. This lacuna Graham’s book admirably and patiently fills. A sign of a good book is that it sets one thinking, and this book did just that. In time-honored Western fashion, it consciously draws parallels and contrasts between us and the other, thereby helping us to see alternatives to our predicaments.

Perhaps it is this work’s stress on the linguistic aspects that raised questions as to the relationships of such “performing dreams” to other aspects of Xavante life. How are continuing contacts with Brazilians, with FUNAI, and with a modern educational system impacting the tribes? What precise power relations exist both within and without the communal councils? Why is consensus sometimes not attained? The power struggles within Quaker groups are all the more severe precisely because Quaker ideology denies that such exist. The absence of “external” (in this case a caste of clergy) power structures does not mean that power or those that can and will wield it are absent.

I was struck in comparing just the photographs in

this book with those presented by Maybury-Lewis in his popularized *The Savage and the Innocent* (Boston: Beacon, 1965) with how even the physical presentation of the Xavante has shifted. Once they wore little, now all have shorts, women are completely modest with tops, sumptuary indicators of great cultural (missionary?) shifts? Of course, Graham notes how change is reflected in some of the songs, but is the change greater than what the songs claim, with their plaintive refrain of “always Xavante”? There is, interestingly, no reference to “ritual” or “symbol” in the index, perhaps reflecting the author’s reluctance to pick up a now convoluted debate. Yet some reference to how this linguistic analysis relates to these issues could be informative.

This work emphasizes once again the multi-disciplinary nature of anthropological research today. Such research richly influences fields such as religion and classical studies. The fluidity of the boundaries of self and of the other and the divine is a dominant theme in Greek mythology and much attention is presently devoted to this thematic. It could be rewarding to see what these studies have to contribute to the issues of performance, multivocality, and divine-human boundaries among the Xavante.

These are but suggestions to augment a detailed and rich study which should be of much use, not only to those concerned with cultural survival, but to all interested in the role of oral traditions in their interface with individuals and their societies. Graham’s work covers in fuller depth an often overlooked aspect of earlier monographs on the Xavante and self-consciously attempts to remember and preserve the performing dreams of Warodi, thus offering us another “discourse of immortality.”

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