

The Conucos of Pino Tumbao:

~~Shifting Cultivation~~

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In The

Dominican Republic

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INTRODUCTION

There are two conceptually distinct but methodologically linked goals which have guided the writing of this paper. The first objective was to collect, organize, and present field data concerning the life of a peasant community in the central highlands of the Dominican Republic. In terms of published anthropological studies, this small Spanish-Caribbean republic is virtually unknown. Only in recent post-revolution (1965) years have anthropologists begun to turn their attention here, and as of yet the products of their field research have yet to be published. My interest in this endeavour is largely personal; having lived for two years in the country as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I chose the field of cultural anthropology as a discipline which would equip me with the tools necessary to deepen, systematize, and cast into a scientific framework the myriad surface impressions with which a different culture never ceases to strike and surprise outsiders.

The second goal of this research has been to put to use and test in a natural, traditional ethnographic field situation the tool-kit of model ethnographic operations outlined in The Nature of Cultural Things by Marvin Harris. This logically and methodologically airtight behavioral research tool had never, to my knowledge, been systematically applied in such a situation.

The complexity of any social scene, the limitations of a lone observer, the demanding, time-consuming operations which would be necessary to apply the model in its entirety; have all led the author himself to caution against treating the book as a step-by-step program of fieldwork--indeed to label its programmatic worth as being of "minor significance" in comparison to its evaluative worth--in serving as a touchstone by which to judge other descriptive practices currently used.¹

While this latter may be true, the field worker who has accepted the book's logical premises, and its view of the nature of the data which the ethnographer has at his disposal, will feel compelled to devise a program based to a large part on the model offered in the book. This summer's field work was largely an attempt of my part to grapple with this issue. The research on which this paper is based was, therefore, both a compilation of as-of-yet unstudied local practices in a Dominican peasant community, and (for me) a first approximation toward an epistemologically valid technique for recording, construing, and analyzing the daily life of a group of people

The research has entailed two distinct classes of endeavours. The field-work phase took place in two segments: a four-and-a-half month period from May to mid-September, 1970; and a one week period from Dec. 24 to Dec. 31, 1970.

The library research entailed the study of current statistics concerning the Dominican Republic; the study of diachronic trends which the inhabitants of the island have manifested during the past centuries, and of which the current situation in my community is a still-evolving end result; and a study of the basic technical and environmental considerations involved in the practice of shifting cultivation, that sequence in the total repertoire of the community which has been singled out for special treatment in this paper.

The presentation will proceed in the following fashion. In Part One I will discuss some of the basic theoretical issues which had to be confronted during the period of data collection, as well as give some information concerning the specifics of the fieldwork. In Part Two I will present first some necessary preliminary information concerning the physical setting and the population under study, followed by a scene-by-scene description of the current "shifting cultivation" horticultural sequence which provides the bulk of the food consumed by the population. In Part Three I will discuss this sequence in its diachronic aspects, comparing the entire sequence, as well as specific aspects of each scene, with historically antecedent varieties of the sequence as gleaned from both written documents and verbal elicitation from older informants. This breakdown will provide a view of the diachronic changes which have occurred through the years in the sequence as a whole. Furthermore the isolation of different aspects of the sequence in terms of diachroni-

cally evolving nodal chains and scenes will permit isolation of the specific demographic, environmental, and cultural parameters which underlie each aspect of the evolution of the sequence as a whole.

Hopefully insight will thus be gleaned into the historical underpinnings of the present day crisis in the Dominican sierra, a scientifically valid overview of their present situation, and some basis for prediction of what will occur in the near future.

The four and a half months which I spent in the field have resulted in data on many aspects of life in the mountain community of Pino Tumbao. Two analytic options were open to me; either write an overall summary of all the data and one paper and expand on each part in the future; or write a detailed paper on each aspect of the data now and condense and combine at a future date. The latter path seemed to be less hazardous to the data. It is much more likely that one will condense and combine on detailed work, than that he will "in the future" dig out his old field notes and try to expand on already completed papers. The research will thus be presented in several separate papers: one on the political activities connected with the elections of 1970; one on the family structure in the Dominican sierra as compared with that reported in other Caribbean communities; another on the archaic, well-conserved brand of Spanish which has survived and is still spoken in the sierra; one on the economics of

livestock raising and coffee growing; on the importance of the lottery in the local economy, and several other topics.

In this paper I shall confine myself as strictly as possible to a description and analysis of the shifting cultivation practiced in the community, and will bring in other domains of life only as these have a demonstrable effect on the practice of shifting cultivation. The making of conucos (cropped shifting cultivation plot) was singled out as the first sphere to be treated, as this particular sequence of scenes played the major part in providing the community's food; and because more man-hours seemed to be dedicated to the behavior chains in this sequence than in any other sequence; and because the obvious logico-physical concatenation of the various activities in this sequence renders the task of finding and reporting the order relatively easy. Though there is no reason to assume that behavior in other domains is less orderly or less amenable to scenic sequencing, the first attempt is more easily achieved in a domains such as that of conuco making.

It is hoped that my choice of the option of writing longer papers on each of these separate areas, such as the present paper, will not tax the patience of the Professors who have to read them.

For various aspects of the research I have relied very heavily on seven authors, three of whom I had with me (in book form) in Pino Tumbao.

1. The Nature of Cultural Things, by Marvin Harris.

This book provided the conceptual framework in which data was collected.

2. Amazon Town, by Charles Wagley. The situation of the men of Pino Tumbao is in many aspects similar to that of the Amazonian manioc growers. The content areas reported on in Amazon Town served me as a guide for areas of inquiry which for comparative purposes should not be neglected. Lack of assistants and adequate time prevented me from getting certain types of quantified information reported in Amazon Town, but I have some systematic information that will permit comparison of the two communities in all significant areas.

3. Composición Social Dominicana, by Juan Bosch. This is a recently (1970) published historical analysis of the development of the population and social structure of the Dominican Republic. The orientation of the analysis is strongly materialistic and in a less detailed way does for the Dominican Republic what the first section of The People of Puerto Rico does for Puerto Rico.

Besides these three books, which I had with me in the field, I relied very heavily on four other works.

4. The People of Puerto Rico, edited by Julian Steward. This is a research project in which the island of Puerto Rico was subjected to a cultural-historical analysis and various communities were analyzed in a cultural-ecological framework. Besides providing a skillfully executed

cultural analysis of an island which is very similar in many respects to the Dominican Republic, two of the field studies (Eric Wolf's and Robert Manner's) provide data on peasant communities which bear many crucial resemblances to Pino Tumbao.

5. Processes and Patterns of Landscape Change in the Linea Noroeste, Dominican Republic, a doctoral dissertation by Gustavo Antonini presented in 1968 to the Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University. Using the geographical concept of landscape evolution, the author traces through Dominican history the series of determinants--both in terms of political events and population changes--which have caused the evolution of landscape in one part of the Dominican Republic. Pino Tumbao, by fortunate coincidence, is located immediately south (in the mountains) of the area which Antonini studied, and thus what Antonini says of the history of his region applies in large part to Pino Tumbao. The availability of this study, carried out in a materialistic frame of reference, provides my data with a historical perspective which I could otherwise not have supplied.

6. Ranunoo Agriculture in the Philippines, by Harold Conklin. Though Conklin studied the shifting cultivation of a primitive group, his division of the process into a series of general phases and his discussion of the important ecological issues was of great use to me. He also presents a detailed topical outline for dealing with shifting

cultivation in an article "The Study of Shifting Cultivation," in Current Anthropology.

7. Shifting Cultivation in Southeastern Asia, by J.E. Spender. This book is an overview of shifting cultivation as practiced in one part of the world, in which the work of several scholars is brought together in an effort to see general patterns and long range trends. Many of Spencer's observations called my attention to aspects of the system in Pino Tumbao which would otherwise have passed unnoticed.

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