

The Barefoot Anthropologist: The Highlands of Champa and Vietnam in the Words of Jacques Dournes

ANDREW HARDY

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The Barefoot Anthropologist follows the footprints left by the unconventional priest-turned-anthropologist Jacques Dournes. This is an excellent book about this unusual scholar *haut en couleurs* who spent a large part—indeed, the best part—of his life in the highlands of central Vietnam.

The first section of the book is an exploration of *Pötao, une théorie du pouvoir chez les Indochinois jörai* written by Dournes in 1977. This is a seminal text in our understanding of the ways the Jarai organized themselves politically, but it also gives a greater insight into how the political is enmeshed with the cultural, the social, and the religious, without which the *Pötao* would have no *raison d'être*. The text is complex in its form because Dournes's writing style in some ways is a mimicry of how the Jarai world is configured. As Hardy notes, Dournes's writing is "circular" and for good reason, since the Jarai world is made up of multiple spheres. The economic, the political, the judiciary, the religious, the profane, and the social create a sophisticated system that overlaps and intersects in the middle where the anthropologist stands barefoot in the mud. This point of intersection is also where he can best make sense of all these interconnections that define the Jarai's way of thinking. As Dournes explains in *Florilège jörai* (1987), the Jarai world and its myths work like a piece of interwoven fabric, made of "repetitions, redundancies, rhythms and symbolisms" that explain one another in a vastly rich system of associations (*ibid.*, 168). However, Dournes also warns us, sometimes it is better not to try to interpret (as with dreams): "you just take them the way they are" (p. 131).

Hardy's rereading of Dournes brings in interesting new analyses of the meanings, roles, and responsibilities of the *Pötao*. As explained on page 41, *Pötao*, evoking the "Cham word for lord and master," has been translated by various scholars such as Charles Meyer as "king" and "prince." The word is also interpreted by Grégory Mikaelian as "nephews" of the Khmer king, who at the end of the nineteenth century used them to consolidate his political power. With their complex yet complementary powers, the *Pötao* of fire, the *Pötao* of wind, and the *Pötao* of water harmonized the relationships linking man with man, and man with nature (p. 40). Yet this harmonizing power extended well beyond the frontiers of the Jarai territory in Vietnam and Cambodia and served to maintain peace, stability, and the viability of commerce along specific trade routes that wound their way through the highlands.

Hardy's exploration of the Jarai-Cham connection raises important lines of inquiry about the historicity, physical borders, and cultural exchanges between the two groups. The argument is not forcefully made so as to leave enough room for the reader to ponder the limits of such powerful interactions and undertake his/her own investigation on the subject.

The second section is an attempt to portray Dournes through his own words by means of English translation. No professional translator would say that this is an easy task, especially for such a person who was not only answering questions but was also “performing.” This is where the limits of the English translation are in the lack of rendition of “Dournes the comedian,” who is more forcefully visible and audible in the appendix. For those who can read French, the original text is worth trying. It enlightens the reader by giving unique insights into Dournes’s exceptional personality and way of thinking.

The afterword by the anthropologist Oscar Salemink takes a few steps back so as to effectively recontextualize Jacques Dournes. The descriptions of key moments in his life, his attachment to the highlands of Vietnam, the richness of the work produced while “exiled in France,” the criticisms he received from his peers, as well as his vitriolic responses to them help create yet another dimension in our attempt to comprehend the barefoot anthropologist.

This section also emphasizes how Dournes never felt that he belonged to France, hence his urge to leave the country after being ordained at a relatively young age and the enduring feeling of *déracinement* (being uprooted) toward the end of his life as a scholar in Paris. This hybrid identity blossomed in the fertile ground of the highlands under the green fingers of his friends: “They are the ones who cultivated me” (p. 121); “I’ve learnt everything over there” (p. 124).

His belonging to different worlds, or none at the same time, as in Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo sacer*, is better illustrated in the ways Jarai women would come to him in the morning to “get rid of their dreams” and for him to “set them free” (p. 131). This is, as Dournes pointed out, a privileged situation for an anthropologist whose informants (especially female ones) allowed him into the deepest recesses of their consciousness, whether motivated by trust or anxiety. For Dournes, “theoretically I was stronger” (p. 131), but for the women he was also endowed with the power to take over their burden. This is even more significant given the most beautiful and poetic book he dedicated to the Jarai woman in 1993: *Forêt, femme, folie: Une traversée de l’imaginaire jarai*. In this, she is the one with the magical power to transcend both the world of the living and the abode of the spirits.

The appendix is a series of original conversations between the author and Dournes. It is probably the best section of the book, and it fully brings Dournes to life. Again, French speakers will agree that it is difficult to properly render the verve of Dournes’s discourse. It is full of humor, sarcasm, and poetry at the same time. This unique snippet of conversation enables us to witness Dournes not only as an anthropologist but also as a magnificent comedian and Jarai storyteller. Dournes himself repeats it many times during his conversation with Hardy: “I am a comedian” (pp. 103, 120, 123–124); “It comes back to me and I could say it again but differently, in another way, in other circumstances” (p. 125); “I’ve learnt how to tell stories” (pp. 135–136).

It is most interesting to see how Dournes brushes off topics he is not interested in talking about. As he mentions, his main interest lies in “the culture, the techniques, the oral literature”

(p. 118) and “the poetic” (p. 119). This is where meanings come from. The various short conversations about the war between 1946 and 1954, which pitted the Vietnamese against the French, are barely touched upon and considered mere “comedy” (p. 101). The word “comedy” here may not only be understood literally, that is, as a performance that intends to be humorous, but also in the sense that there is something profoundly absurd in it since there are more important things to care about such as the Jarai culture, techniques, oral literature, and poetic legends.

In the same way, Dournes teases out what is important and what is less important when pondering the Jarai economy. This is less about money than about storytellers, artists, and musicians for whom money has no place (p. 123). Some of the logic and beauty of the reasoning may strike one as overtly ideological and full of romanticism. But Dournes would probably argue that this is an ontological part of the Jarai world and Drit, its Jarai hero, is the epitome of eternal hope and romance. As a result, the economy of the local practice of slash and burn is remarkable in the simplicity of its logic and rationale (p. 125).

In unique ways some of Dournes’s arguments demonstrate his anarchic views on politics and economics, even while they simultaneously show how his way of reasoning is also deeply anarchic. As the anthropologist puts it when referring to the *Quête du Saint Graale*, the *Chanson de Roland*, and *Tristan and Iseult*, “It is pure creation and creation is free by definition” (p. 119) and “I am anti-economist the same way as I am an anarchist” (p. 120). (It should be noted that the sentence at the bottom of page 121 has a verb missing; the sentence should read: “on *est libre*.”)

This book brings together different vistas that help us comprehend the complex personality of Jacques Dournes, from his seminal text *Pötao, une théorie du pouvoir chez les Indochinois jörai* to his scholarly place within the more mainstream ethnographic milieu in France, and to a live performance showcasing his comedic skills and the extent of his creative, improvising, and lyrical mind. Dournes was a man deeply charmed by Jarai culture. His vast and prolific corpus, ranging from the linguistic to the botanical, remains unique in the anthropology of the highlands. His books reveal a mind that is rigorous yet imaginative, rational yet poetic, possessing a writing style that makes him one of the best storytellers, poets, and linguistic musicians of the Jarai. There is no other way to better understand Dournes and the people he worked with than to roll up one’s trousers and follow him on the muddy trail of this ethnographic journey.

Krisna Uk
Center for Khmer Studies

References

Dournes, Jacques. 1987. *Florilège jörai*. Paris: Sudestasia.