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People of the Desert and Sea: Ethnobotany of the Seri Indians by Richard Stephen Felger;
Mary Beck Moser

Review by: William Merrill

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This book, edited by R. F. Ellen, is about anthropological research practices. The volume is the first in a series, and is intended to address matters of concern to all who are engaged in ethnographic research. The book is composed of nine chapters, and includes 22 contributors. A general goal is to make anthropological research practices more an object of open exchange than before, and to offer a formal discussion of the range of activities and operations involved in ethnographic research. Ethnographic research is often viewed as a casual activity—loose, open-ended, and soft. If one hangs around a situation long enough an understanding is achieved by means of absorption. The Ellen volume should go a long way to demonstrate that ethnography is a very difficult and demanding task. As Ellen writes in the introduction, "Ethnographic research has to be worked at, and results are achieved through painstaking application of a body of techniques, which may be either implicit or explicit, and based on certain kinds of assumption." In the second chapter Ladislav Holy discusses the relationship between research methods and theory and notes that no observations can be made, "unless the observer has a point of view which guides his selection and interests" (p. 18).

Chapter 2 deals with the interdependency of theory, research methods, and interpretation, and discusses the importance of introspection and the anthropologist's ability to reflect on experience. It is also observed that "so far, the anthropologist's own experience has been conspicuously absent from anthropological monographs." But, Holy contends, the anthropologist's own experience has always played a major role in the analysis of data.

Just what is participant observation? Chapter 4, "Approaches to Ethnographic Research," and chapter 5, "The Fieldwork Experience," discuss the range and complexity of research activities. (Chapter 3 is a rather typical history of field methods, the least innovative chapter in the book.) Participation in the lives of the people studied is a minimal requirement for conducting research. It enables anthropologists to observe behavior: to conduct informal and formal interviews; to collect statistical and census data; to carry out psychological tests; to photograph, film, or tape-record rituals and ceremonies. Clammer writes in chapter 4: "The fieldwork concept, at first sight apparently unproblematic, is actually really rather complex in terms of the multiplicity of styles that the idea covers and in the theoretical and methodological problems that it raises" (p. 82).

Chapter 2, dealing with the methodological and epistemological implication of participation observation, and chapter 5, a discussion of the complex social and personal aspects of the field experience raise a number of related issues. Participation involves interaction with others, and this interaction is influenced by features such as gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. The methodological and epistemological aspects of this issue are not discussed here but in chapter 2 (by Holy) and by Raymond Firth in the Foreword to the book: "Our perceptions

and statements must invariably pass through a personal lens with all the individual assumptions and mode of thought which our specific upbringing and our general literate training have helped to establish" (p. vii). More discussion is needed on the implications of this statement since anthropology is the study of a distinctive "other," where social inequalities exist between those doing the research and those "others." This is one reason that we need, to use Eric Wolf's terms, "a sociology of anthropological knowledge."

Ethics is an important aspect of ethnographic research. In chapter 6 Akeroyd notes that "no researcher is spared ethical problems," but "some dilemmas are more acute for ethnographers because of their moral involvement with their informants." Akeroyd provides a reasonable discussion of ethical problems and a good coverage of the literature.

Chapters 7 through 9 depart from the first six. Chapter 7 provides an overview of some of the preparation that must be made by someone planning fieldwork: getting permission from the host country to carry out research, literature searches, choosing a field site, and language training. Preparing for fieldwork is a long-term process. This is a chapter that could be assigned to students rather early in their graduate training. Chapter 8, entitled "Producing Data," deals with the different kinds of data that can be collected, but does not deal with how data is collected. The last chapter, "Data into Text," is more about the organization and retrieval of data than the actual writing itself. Here the use of the computer for data manipulation is discussed.

The book covers a wide range of topics. This is one of its strengths and weaknesses. Almost every issue one would need to raise in considering problems of ethnographic research is mentioned, but most are not discussed in great depth. It can be expected that subsequent volumes will be more specific and detailed.

***People of the Desert and Sea: Ethnobotany of the Seri Indians.* RICHARD STEPHEN FELGER and MARY BECK MOSER. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985. xv + 435 pp., maps, tables, photographs, appendixes, references, index. \$65.00 (cloth).**

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In the early 1950s, when Mary Beck Moser and Richard Felger began their research, the Seris numbered only 215 people, a remnant population in retreat from Mexican encroachment and violence. Their refuge was Tiburón Island and the adjacent Sonoran coast of the Gulf of California, where fresh water was scarce but wild foods abundant. One of the few remaining hunter-gatherer groups in the world, they relied on their traditional techniques and knowledge of the environment to survive. In the ensuing three decades, their population has doubled but their way of life has been transformed, primarily because of their increasing involvement in the capitalist world economy through commercial fishing and, more recently, the production of exquisite baskets and ironwood sculptures for the

tourist and art markets. In the process, younger Seris have come to regard much of the traditional knowledge of their elders as irrelevant. By talking with and observing older Seris, botanist Felger and linguist Moser have preserved a portion of this knowledge that otherwise appears destined to disappear.

The extensive literature now available on hunter-gatherers has conditioned anthropologists to expect a highly sophisticated understanding of the natural world, but one is never entirely prepared for the depth and subtlety one finds. Felger and Moser convey these characteristics and much more in their impressively detailed account of Seri ethnobotany. Theirs is a thorough, careful piece of scholarship, with a tone of confidence gained through their many years of work with the Seri.

The book is divided into three, increasingly lengthy sections. The first provides a brief overview of Seri history and ethnography, a description of the principal plant communities in the Seri's traditional homeland, and a review of the terrestrial and marine animal life. The second section, entitled "Biological Ethnography," begins with an outline of the Seri calendar and an excellent description and linguistic analysis of the Seri biological classification system, in which the relationship between Seri taxa and those of Western biosystematics is indicated. The remainder of section II details the Seris' ideas about the uses of plants, animals, and minerals, with the discussion organized into functional and topical compartments of Western derivation and significance: for example, "Water and Food Quest," "The Supernatural," "Shelter and Fuel," and "Equipment." The final section is composed of nearly 400 "species accounts" in which Seri knowledge and utilization of plants is presented species by species. Each account is divided into essentially the same categories as section II with some duplication but considerable new information as well. Two appendixes follow, one listing Seri plant names and their Western taxonomic equivalents, the other providing biographical sketches of the Seri people mentioned in the text. The book ends with "Literature Cited" and an extensive but not exhaustive index.

This work is a major contribution to northern Mexican and North American ethnography and provides important insights into the relationship between one group of hunter-gatherers and their environment. The writing is clear and concise, with jargon kept to a minimum, and the production is first-rate. The numerous photographs and line drawings are outstanding and well-chosen, adding considerably to the text.

The authors achieve their goal of presenting a comprehensive view of Seri ethnobotany, but many problems, beyond the scope of their work, remain to be addressed. For example, the Seris' adaptation should be analyzed from a more ecological perspective, examining if possible the changes it has undergone in response to modifications induced since European contact 450 years ago. Another rather different but critically relevant topic for future investigation is how the Seris envision plants to fit into the larger cosmological scheme of things. Although the authors pay considerable attention to Seri ideas about plants, their handling of Seri world view is superficial. An unfortunate consequence is

that their use of plants occasionally comes across as irrational or superstitious. An example: the Seris employed several different plants to control the weather, an apparently inexplicable act until it is realized that they also postulated a spiritual connection between plants on the one hand and clouds, rain, and storms on the other. Such connections, only hinted at here, would if more fully explored add an important dimension to our understanding of the Seri and their ethnobotany.

Because they did not encounter any clear-cut system of Seri biological classification and wanted to facilitate use of their data by Western readers, the authors relied primarily on Western rather than Seri categories to organize the book. In this regard, their ethnobotany clearly differs from the more anthropological ethnoscientific research conducted over the last few decades in Mexican Indian communities to the south. It is, however, similar to the important investigations completed in adjacent areas of northern Mexico, particularly those of botanist Robert Bye among the Tarahumara and geographer Campbell Pennington among the Tarahumara, Northern Tepehuan, and Mountain Pima. Felger and Moser's work fills very competently a major gap in our understanding of the region and stands as a tribute to the knowledge, fortitude, and ingenuity of the Seri people.

***Contributions to the Archaeology and Ethnohistory of Greater Mesoamerica.* WILLIAM J. FOLAN, ed. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985. xxxvi + 334 pp., maps, figures, tables, photographs, references. \$28.95 (cloth).**

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William J. Folan's edited volume is portrayed aptly by its rather unspecific title. The compilation as an entity lacks thematic consistency and does not achieve the quality of several of the component papers. These ten contributions are linked in the collection only by their general focus on various regions within "greater Mesoamerica," the large territorial domain that Folan (Preface) and many of the volume contributors believe includes northern Mexico, as well as much of the southwestern and southeastern United States, as integral, northern peripheries of the ancient Mesoamerican World.

The volume opens refreshingly with an informative introductory essay written by two long-time colleagues and collaborators of Professor Carroll L. Riley, to whom this volume is dedicated. Basil C. Hedrick's fascinating familial and educational background of Carroll Riley, the man, is followed by J. Charles Kelley's brief perspective on Riley, the anthropological scholar. Kelley notes (p. 11) that in analyses of the cultural relationship between the Southwestern and Mesoamerican cultural spheres, Riley has found it easier to refer to the unity of the "greater Southwest" (northern Mexico and the American Southwest) than to "greater Mesoamerica," the broader construct used by both Kelley and Folan. Given this lack of unanimity (even among close associates) concerning the nature, timing, and