

ROBERT MCCORKLE NETTING, 1934–95

AN APPRECIATION

Bob Netting began his research career in Nigeria in 1960. Why did his *Hill Farmers of Nigeria: cultural ecology of the Kofyar of the Jos plateau* (1968) become a classic of the literature? When I and my Nigerian students began to learn his insights into the Kofyar people, and their intensive farming system among the crags and scarps of the southern edge of the Jos plateau, I think we were impressed by two attributes. These attributes continued to be characteristic of his work, as he extended his interest to other times and places (notably in *Balancing on an Alp: ecological change and continuity in a Swiss mountain community*, 1981). The first was an impressive grasp of methodology that was neither obtrusive nor unnecessarily complex. Yet he combined the sweaty challenge of collecting data in the field with the art of presenting it elegantly to his readers, many of whom are not anthropologists. We geographers could easily be jealous of the ease with which he negotiated the intricacies of scale, and linked fieldwork with theory. The second was the integrity of his theoretical arguments, always disciplined by the data yet imparting a clarity missing from some more forced or ideologically committed work. His fascination with the relationships linking population growth and density with changing farming systems finally produced a magnificent synthesis of empirical experience (*Smallholders, Householders: farm families and the ecology of intensive, sustainable agriculture*, 1993) that must surely benefit his intellectual heirs for years to come.

His interest in the analysis of longitudinal change took him back to Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s. His long-term commitment to a major theoretical field and to understanding change among the Kofyar, perhaps not unusual for anthropologists, and the scale of his achievement, have something to teach other social scientists used to hopping about among subjects and places all too frequently, and nicely rebuke the short-lived research foray, shallow populism and donor-driven expediency that are only too obvious in contemporary debates about population change in its economic and environmental context.

His views were the product of reflection, not dogma, and he was generous in his appreciation of others. His students must be as glad to acknowledge his intellectual leadership as he was to set down his debt to Julian Steward's school of cultural ecology. His work brought the best of anthropological insights to bear on a rich interdisciplinary field where fundamental social science has obvious value for policy formulation and development. Would that some of us who have learnt from him could do half as well!

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