

A LEAF OF HONEY AND THE PROVERBS OF THE RAINFOREST

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Published by: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1988, 319 pages

In the mid-1970s, Joseph Sheppherd completed the requirements for his undergraduate degree in anthropology with a trip to the Cameroon to study the worldview of the Ntumu community through an analysis of their traditional proverbs. *A Leaf of Honey* is both a personal account of his year with the Ntumu and an experiment in presenting ethnographic information to a nonspecialist audience.

The chapters of the book alternate tales of Sheppherd's experiences with brief descriptions of aspects of Ntumu culture (in the form of letters to his anthropology professor in California). On one hand, this double structure could be seen as a drawback. The story of Sheppherd's growth as a person and a nascent anthropologist emerges in fragments rather than as a full, sequential narrative; and the interspersed accounts of Ntumu culture are too brief and isolated to permit the reader to assemble a comprehensive vision of modern African village life. On the other hand, by regarding the organization of the book itself as an experiment, the reader comes closer to experiencing what I think Sheppherd intends by this unusual structure: as we alternate anecdote and abstraction, we spiral nearer and nearer to a recognition of the power and vitality of the Ntumu vision of life.

Like everyone who travels to a different country, Sheppherd and his family encounter physical danger, illness, political troubles, economic problems, minor and major cross-cultural misunderstandings, frequent discomfort, and fear. He also finds numerous opportunities for self-awareness, self-reliance, new friendships, new skills, and help from unexpected quarters. He presents his observations and reflections about his experiences in a series of quick-reading narratives that are often amusing, and just as often enlightening. Sheppherd's metatopic is the challenge of eliminating the deep-rooted ethnocentrism that Westerners inevitably take abroad with them. As he uncovers layer after layer of significance in Ntumu proverbial wisdom, he also strips off his own—and his readers'—blindness to the virtues and value of other cultures.

The proverbs serve the lay reader as an entertaining and painless entrée to a distinctive central African understanding of common sense, human nature, and personal and social morality. As the world moves towards ever-increasing interdependence, the intellectual paradox of anthropology becomes a personal and political challenge for us all: that human beings are very much alike and, at the same time, very different indeed. The Ntumu say, "Man is a leaf of honey"—like the leaf in which honey has been wrapped, there is always some sweetness, some goodness, to be found in people. Yet the Ntumu also recognize the importance of social and cultural differences: "The world is divided like a cola nut," into distinct, interlocking pieces. Sheppherd uses Bahá'í philosophy and anthropological assumptions persuasively to present his intercultural experiences as a demonstration that differences can be the basis for unity, rather than divisiveness.

The book is a treat for anyone who has tried to travel with an open mind and an open heart, or who wants to do so. Its evocative description of the tropical environment and lively characterization of village people will delight readers who are attracted to learn more about Africa. And its Bahá'í elements challenge us to think deeply about the implications of a genuinely religious world-mindedness.

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