EVON ZARTMAN VOGT JR.

20 AUGUST 1918 · 13 MAY 2004

PROCEEDINGS OF THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY VOL. 150, NO. 3, SEPTEMBER 2006

EVON ZARTMAN VOGT JR., the preeminent ethnologist of the Maya Indians of the state of Chiapas in Mexico, died of pulmonary fibrosis in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 13 May 2004, in his eighty-sixth year. During his long and highly productive career, he established new benchmarks for interdisciplinary ethnographic research, which have made his multi-decade field project in the highlands of Chiapas a classic in the field of anthropology.[1]

Evon Vogt was born in Gallup, New Mexico, on 20 August 1918, the eldest of four children and the only son. He grew up on a sheep ranch about forty-five miles southeast of Gallup, where his closest neighbors were Navahos and Mormons, and the pueblo of Zuni was only twenty-five miles away. Spanish-Americans and homesteaders from Texas, who were also in the region, further diversified the cultural environment in which he was raised. This exposure to so many different cultures during his formative years was to have a significant influence on the path he chose for his life.

After graduating from high school in Gallup at the top of his class, he worked for a year as the ranger at El Morro National Monument in order to earn money for college, matriculating at the University of Chicago in the fall of 1937. He majored in geography, but, by the end of his senior year, he had become more interested in anthropology and made arrangements to enter the graduate program at Chicago in 1941.

In the same year, he married Catherine Christine ("Naneen") Hiller, a fellow student at Chicago, whom he had met two years before. The wedding took place in Salina, Kansas, her hometown. They were happily married for sixty-three years and had four children, one daughter and three sons.

As was the case with many anthropologists of his generation, Vogt's professional education was interrupted by World War II. After joining the navy in 1942, he served for a year "as administrative officer of the squadron of amphibious PBYs . . . , which were engaged in patrolling for and destroying, with depth charges, the German submarines off the northeastern coast of Brazil."[2] This experience gave him first-hand knowledge of Brazilian culture and broadened his appreciation of cultural diversity. After training as an air combat intelligence

[1] Much of this essay is based on conversations I had with Vogt while I was a graduate student at Harvard between 1962 and 1968 and in subsequent years. Other information comes from conversations with Nan Vogt and from Vogt's autobiography, *Fieldwork among the Maya: Reflections on the Harvard Chiapas Project* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

[2] Vogt, *Fieldwork among the Maya*, 34.

officer, he was posted to the Pacific theater, where he participated in the final assault on Japan.

He was released by the navy in 1946 and returned to the University of Chicago to continue his graduate studies in anthropology, receiving his Ph.D. in 1948. The faculty of the Department of Anthropology at Chicago included four cultural anthropologists during those years: Fred Eggan, Robert Redfield, Sol Tax, and W. Lloyd Warner. Vogt worked closely with Warner on his M.A. thesis project, a study of the social structure of a Midwestern rural community south of Chicago. This was part of a much larger study of a small city and its rural hinterland, directed by Warner and involving both sociologists and anthropologists, that gave Vogt his first experience of a multidisciplinary approach to the life of a community.

When the time came for Vogt to choose a topic for his doctoral dissertation, he turned to an old family friend from New Mexico, Clyde Kluckhohn, a professor at Harvard, for advice. Kluckhohn invited him to work among the Ramah Navaho. Vogt describes his visit to Harvard to consider this possibility as follows:

> After a look at the Ramah Navaho data, I had a discussion with Clyde in which two suggestions for a dissertation topic emerged. One was a study of Navaho polygyny, of which there were still several cases among the Ramah Navaho, a number of them being sororal polygyny. The other idea was to study the returning Navaho veterans from World War II to discover how they had been changed by their experiences in the armed forces and what effect they were having on cultural change among the Ramah Navaho. I chose to undertake the study of the veterans which, at the time, seemed both timely and natural for me to do since I was also a fellow veteran.[3]

This project, of course, brought Vogt back to New Mexico, with the skills necessary to achieve a greater understanding of one of the cultures he had known as a boy. It also initiated the Southwestern period of his academic career. The book resulting from this research was published as *Navaho Veterans: A Study of Changing Values* in 1951.

In 1948, Vogt accepted the offer of an instructorship in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University. One of the attractions of this position was the opportunity to continue working in the Southwest on Kluckhohn's Comparative Study of Values in Five Cultures Project, which had just received a large grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. The five cultures chosen for study were those of the Navaho, Zuni, Mormon, Spanish-American, and Texas homesteader communities, the

[3] Ibid., 41.

very same ones Vogt had known from childhood. His assignment was to explore the values of the Texans of Fence Lake, who were the subject of his second book, *Modern Homesteaders: Life in a 20th Century Frontier Community*, published in 1955.

It was during this period that Vogt became interested in the subject of water dowsing (sometimes called "water witching"), a technique involving the use of a forked stick to locate the best place for a well to be drilled. With the help of his colleague Ray Hyman, a social psychologist in the Department of Social Relations, he developed an interdisciplinary project that "demonstrated (a) that water divining does not work to locate underground water, and (b) that it is a technique of magical divination in American culture."[4] Their book on this subject, *Water Witching U.S.A.*, appealed to a large audience; it went through two editions and remained in print for more than thirty years.[5]

By 1954, Vogt was ready to leave the familiar territory of New Mexico and move to a new anthropological frontier outside the United States. His interest in "old" Mexico (well south of the border) was stimulated by a ten-day vacation with his wife in Mexico City in 1950 and reinforced by a sabbatical spent on Lake Chapala in 1952. After considering several possible locations for a field site in northern Mexico, he chose the highlands of the state of Chiapas near the border with Guatemala as the best location for his next research project, not only because of the cultural richness of the region, but also because the environment would be healthier for his family.

In Chiapas, Vogt benefitted from his previous experience with projects involving multidisciplinary teams of researchers—both professionals and students—under Warner and Kluckhohn and developed some new techniques of his own. Like his mentors, he gradually recruited graduate students to join his project, but unlike his predecessors, he reached down into the undergraduate ranks to identify talented students to come to Chiapas in the summers, hoping to entice them into careers in cultural anthropology. Some of his best graduate students were recruited in this way. His freshman seminars at Harvard were memorable, providing opportunities for young students to have free access to the project's field data in preparation for field projects they themselves would undertake in the summer. He was a warm and dynamic teacher; a student lucky enough to have been chosen for one of his freshman seminars could count on his support throughout college and beyond.

At last count, 143 men and women—colleagues and students—had

---

[4] Ibid., 59.

[5] E. Z. Vogt and R. Hyman, *Water Witching U.S.A.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959; 2nd edition 1979).

spent at least one field season in Chiapas in connection with Vogt's project.[6] From so many researchers came a torrent of publications. In the first twenty years alone (1957–77), the Harvard Chiapas Project produced twenty-seven books and monographs, twenty-one Ph.D. dissertations, thirty-three A.B. honors theses, two novels, and a film, not to mention hundreds of articles.[7] To my knowledge, no other ethnographic research project has had such a splendid output.

Vogt himself was responsible for many of these publications. He authored three books on Zinacantan, the Tzotzil Maya community that served as the ethnographic focus of the Harvard Chiapas Project during the twenty-three years of its existence,[8] and dozens of articles. He was a firm believer in fine-grained empirical research; the data he collected on Zinacanteco religion are unbelievably rich and his analysis of them revealing. Although much of his time went to administering this project and obtaining funds to support it (from the American Philosophical Society, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the National Science Foundation),[9] he still found time for his research and for publishing its results.

Vogt was also active in administration at Harvard. After Kluckhohn's untimely death in 1960, he headed the anthropology wing of the Department of Social Relations. In 1969, he was tapped to chair the Department of Anthropology for four years. And in 1974, he and his wife were invited to serve as co-masters of Kirkland House, one of the residential houses for undergraduates modeled on the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, which they did with great verve and style for eight years.

Vogt received many honors during his long and productive life. His massive ethnography, *Zinacantan: A Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas*, won the Faculty Prize "for the best work of scholarship written by a Harvard faculty member and published by the Harvard University Press" in 1969 and the Fray Bernardino de Sahagún Prize for the same year from the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia of Mexico.[10] He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and

---

[6] *Fieldwork among the Maya,* 431–37.

[7] E. Z. Vogt, *Bibliography of the Harvard Chiapas Project: The First Twenty Years 1957–1977* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1978), 30.

[8] E. Z. Vogt, *Zinacantan: A Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969); *The Zinacantecos of Mexico: A Modern Maya Way of Life* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970); *Tortillas for the Gods: A Symbolic Analysis of Zinacanteco Rituals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).

[9] *Bibliography of the Harvard Chiapas Project,* 3.

[10] *Fieldwork among the Maya,* 312.

Sciences in 1960, to the National Academy of Sciences in 1979, and to the American Philosophical Society in 1999. In 1978, he was decorated with the Aguila Azteca (Aztec Eagle), the highest honor given by the Republic of Mexico to a foreigner.

Evon Vogt is survived by his wife, Nan, his four children—the Countess Shirley Naneen Vogt Teleki, Evon Zartman Vogt III, Eric Edwards Vogt, and Charles Anthony Vogt—six grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. The passing of the architect of the Harvard Chiapas Project has stilled one of the formative voices of American cultural anthropology in the second half of the twentieth century.

Elected 1999

VICTORIA R. BRICKER
Professor of Anthropology
Tulane University