

**Shokeid, Moshe, *Gay Voluntary Associations in New York: Public Sharing and Private Lives*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, 232 pages.**

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This book is the record of the fifth major fieldwork study by the Israeli anthropologist, Moshe Shokeid, and it marks an investment of more than three decades in ongoing field research in New York City. In 1988, his study, *Children of Circumstances*, examined the lives of *yordim*, Israeli emigrants to New York, and in 1995 his landmark ethnography, *A Gay Synagogue in New York*, was published (Shokeid 1988, 2003 [1995]). Before his work in New York, Shokeid conducted research among Moroccan immigrants to Israel and Israeli Arabs in an Israeli town. Like many other anthropologists in the last half-century, Shokeid's anthropology has not involved a protracted visit to an alien locale to study "primitive" others. As an Ashkenazi *sabra*, he has studied Sephardic Jews and Arabs in his own country. As a visiting Israeli scholar, he has studied Israelis who have become permanent residents of New York. As a heterosexual Jew, raised in an Orthodox Judaism that he repudiates, he has attended a gay synagogue whose services and membership deliberately flout the rules and practices of his youth. In the case of the voluntary associations and congregations studied in this book, Shokeid is on more foreign ground, inasmuch as about half the membership of the voluntary associations in whose activities he participated was non-Jewish. However, because of some overlap with the membership of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, there is some continuity in his last two studies. *A Gay Synagogue* is a more strictly focused ethnography, informed by Shokeid's deep knowledge of Jewish culture, including the religion he rejects and a style of discourse with which he is familiar. It is very much a thick description in the Geertzian sense. In *Gay Voluntary Associations*, the author casts his net much more widely. The result is a series of very interesting ethnographic vignettes, but there is also occasionally a feeling that the reader is skimming the surface of the social worlds Shokeid describes.

Over several fieldwork seasons and short visits, commencing in 1995 and ending in 2010, Shokeid studied a few of the 120 groups that met at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Greenwich Village. These included a group of older gays (SAGE – Senior Action in Gay Environment), Sexual Compulsives Anonymous (SCA), a group of bisexuals, Men of All Colors Together, and a circle of Gentle Men. The latter group meet to engage in mutual fondling and massaging that does not lead to genital encounters. Both at the center and during a period in Iowa, Shokeid attended meetings of Bears who flout gay norms about bodily appearance and fashion. While attending a Bear Pride Convention in Chicago, he broke his convention of chastity and experienced what he rather coyly describes as a "sexual activity." He also participated in worship in four gay and lesbian congregations, which were the gay synagogue he had already studied, and a Catholic and two Protestant congregations, one of them Afro-American. He correctly notes that much previous research has focused on sexual activity and issues of identity and that much less has

been written about the social organisation of lesbian and gay life.

Shokeid believes that, historically, Americans have tended to form social bonds in voluntary associations whose presence compensates for the absence of corporate kin groups and the relative weakness of extended family ties. He notes that Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to observe this tendency. The lesbians and gays of New York are truly American in their propensity to join a few such groups. Every diverse strand of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender life could be represented in the 120 associations – the size of New York and its gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer community ensured the recognition of particular identities. Shokeid was struck by the emotional frankness manifested in the groups in which he participated. People were willing to confess their hopes, fears, strengths, and vulnerabilities among members of their group. They were also not afraid to embrace and express emotional warmth. Indeed, this seems to be a goal of some of the associations he studied. This was in a loose sense a manifestation of a therapeutic culture, although professional therapy was not offered by them. To an Israeli like Shokeid, this was unusual. It is normal in Israel, we are told, to be uptight and certainly not to express one's emotions before relative strangers. Psychotherapy is usually a practice devoted to the mentally ill. The author believes that the tight web of the family ensures that nobody is so isolated as to need the assistance of fellow members of a voluntary association. Gays and lesbians in Israel may be sustained by their families. One wonders, however, whether they could also be wrecked by them.

*Gay Voluntary Associations* and *A Gay Synagogue* are both latter-day structural-functionalist ethnographies, although they are hardly untouched by the uncertainties that have affected our discipline since the advent of the crisis of representation. The ghosts of Max Gluckman and Victor Turner are ever present, Mary Douglas is invoked once, and the shade of Durkheim always lurks in the background, although he is not acknowledged by name. However, the Marxian strain in the Manchester School seems to be weakened. Functionalism is clearly evident in the idea that conversations (and actions) among group members act as a kind of therapy. Furthermore, they promote *communitas*. This is true of the members of SCA, and most emphatically of SAGE (the group of older gays):

I conclude with Sam's words, "the group has a life of its own," a reflexive metaphor for a social product and a mirror of collective consciousness. It was sustained by the continuous investment of its evolving membership. This sense of *communitas* revealed an underlying awareness of a shared identity of older gay men as evocatively expressed on one occasion by Irving: "You walk with SAGE [in the gay parade] and young beautiful men on the sidewalks applaud proudly. They see what they are going to become!" (62).

The bisexual circle is said to offer its members a sense of legitimacy because theirs is a somewhat stigmatised status, a "fifth column" of liminal creatures occupying a borderland

between heterosexuals and homosexuals, many of whom adhere to an essentialist credo. Members of gay congregations who attend sermons,

although passive and not always able to follow the details and structure of the intricate oral presentation, are nevertheless engaged in a “cultural performance,” in a discourse engrossing them in a kind of sentimental education. It helps reconfirm their identity and worldview as a morally sound community – as worthy Christians and Jews, loyal American citizens and, in particular, proud gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals. (173)

These insights are valid and appropriate in all ways. However, my experience of voluntary associations is that the search for *communitas* is often obscured by quotidian disputes over power, personality, and principle. A central theme in the work of the early Manchester School (Gluckman, Marwick, early Turner) was the study of conflict, often over real stakes such as land and inheritance, which were manifested in law cases and incidents of alleged witchcraft, and how order was restored, despite or even through the feud. Obviously, if one discusses dispute cases, the dice are loaded, and, furthermore, voluntary associations can resolve difficulties because they can fission or disappear more readily than villages or kin groups. Nonetheless, it is legitimate to ask what we learn about debates in the voluntary associations and congregations in which Shokeid participated. His ethnography of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (the gay synagogue) is compelling because of the rich detail of certain episodes, such as the decision whether or not to hire a rabbi when the congregation reached a critical size and what kind of rabbi would be hired (the choice was a woman who represented Reconstructionist Judaism). Is there anything similar in this book? In the chapter on older gays, there are a couple of exchanges that indicate that clashes of opinion and personality differences are always present. One member allowed himself to be swindled and abandoned by a young lover who stole his car, swindled others, and ended up in jail. When he confesses that he still loves the huckster, another member (unlike the author) is most unsympathetic. One of the regulars leaves the group because he has been “put on the spot” and upbraided by others. Another group, Men of All Colors Together, is beset by the problems of American society at large. There is tension over the demeaning stereotypes that many white gays have about the sexual attributes of black men, and, on one occasion, it leads to a “heated argument” (123, 124). At other points in the ethnography, there is too much thin description. Perhaps this lack might have been resolved by more use of the extended case method so beloved of the Manchester School, but the only instance in the book is a rather uninformative account of a series of not too successful attempts by a set of friends, including the author, to set up a

bisexual gathering that might “bring together men and women to initiate and consummate the experience of emotional and physical *communitas* (103). Likewise, the very interesting section on sermons at a gay Protestant church would have been enriched if some of the texts had been made available to the reader.

The ethnographic chapters in Shokeid’s book are sandwiched between chapters that are theoretically of interest. In the first chapter, he conducts his own review of some key landmarks in gay anthropology and explains that his heterosexual identity has made him part of a tiny minority of students of same-sex sexuality. Very obviously, he feels it necessary to oppose (as Stephen Murray notably does) the argument that the anthropologist has to engage in sexual relations to learn anything of value about gays and bisexuals. In the second chapter, the ghost of another great ancestor, Georg Simmel, is invoked to explain the problem anthropologists, like all of us, encounter with friends, acquaintances, family, interlocutors, and informants, which consists in the fact that the keeping and revealing of secrets is part of the presentation of self in social interaction. In this case, Shokeid finds out, only after an emergency visit to a hospital, that his long-time friend and informant, “Jeff,” is AIDS positive. He finds out that the stigma of AIDS is still (as of 2008) a potent factor in interaction among gays as well as interaction with the heterosexual world. “Jeff” is also a major figure in a later chapter. Using a technique perfected by American anthropologists such as Oscar Lewis, Lewis Langness, Vincent Crapanzano, and Marjorie Shostak, Shokeid relates the life histories (detailed portraits) of “Jeff,” a Jewish civil servant, and “Nigel,” a black structural engineer, to explore the world of gay subjectivity. The understanding of the emotions of “others” is perhaps the most difficult of anthropology’s tasks. Success is hard to measure, but the author’s portrait of both of his friends is nuanced and subtle.

Although I have not been loath to criticise flaws in this ethnography, this book is a worthy, theoretically sophisticated contribution by a veteran anthropologist to the understanding not only of gay (and, to a lesser extent, of lesbian and bisexual) society in North America but also of the disparate ways in which social groups of all kinds are created and deployed in North American cities, where they may be the subjects of our “polymorphous perception” (203).

## References

- Shokeid, Moshe  
1988 *Children of Circumstances: Israeli Emigrants in New York*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.  
2003 [1995] *A Gay Synagogue in New York*. New York: Columbia University Press. Revised edition. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
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