

Culture



Peter METCALF, *A Borneo Journey into Death*, Philadelphia, The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. 275 pages, US \$23.00 (cloth)

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lin's account is rich and offers a fascinating view of Kaluli cosmological notions, all the more notable since this ironically puts paid to the editor's inflated claims for the value of direct observation : Schieffelin's material comes exclusively from discussions with informants since the *bau a* ceased to be performed before Schieffelin arrived in the field.

An impetus for this volume in the first place was Read's original account of the *nama* cult of the Gahuku-Gama, and two of the contributions to the collection flesh out this picture with descriptions of similar rites among related peoples. Newman and Boyd discuss initiation among the Awa, particularly those aspects dealing with the purging, supplanting, and augmenting of bodily substances. Making excellent use of a variety of materials, they sketch the outlines of a grammar of gender idioms transmuted in theories of the body. Hays and Hays analyse closely similar material for the Ndumba but focus on the analytically significant issues of opposition and complementarity. Their application of these formal notions is always firmly grounded in the ethnography, and they are the only contributors to the volume to juxtapose male rites with women's rites. The sense of a whole that emerges has intriguing ramifications, and one finds, for example, Ndumba women masquerading as men in richly suggestive contexts. Here there is grist for many analytic mills.

Aside from Patricia Hays, who presumably provided much of the material on Ndumba women's rites, the only other woman to contribute to this volume is Deborah Gewertz, who describes initiation among the Chambri of the Sepik. Strangely, there is no development here of the obvious questions concerning women's participation in and views of male initiatory performances. Instead, her account focuses on Chambri initiation as a sort of drama of affinal relations, linking the rites to an elaborate moiety structure. The style and problems are generally Batesonian and reminiscent of *Naven* with an underlying preoccupation with symmetries and oppositions. This is by far the most "social structural" approach in the collection, and as such offers a contrast with the more symbolically oriented pieces.

Keesing's introduction is in fact a review and thematic survey. He suggests some good possibilities for comparative analysis, argues against the inadequacy of simple-minded ecological interpretations, and situates cult ideologies in the perspective of gender politics. Curiously, a couple of recurrent themes seem to have been overlooked. One of the most striking of these is the fact that virtually all of the rites have critical phases in the forest, with a

marked preference for stream sites. Schieffelin and Poole are the only authors who really seem to recognize this as a leitmotif in initiations, and one wonders if Gell's Umeda work has fallen on deaf ears. Secondly, most of the authors make much of the separation of novices from their mothers (and women generally), but little attention is paid to the fact that all these rites also require a distance between *fathers* and their sons : the critical phases of the rites invariably require the participation of a man whose identity (whether as mother's brother or as stranger) is always that of *Other*. Better use of general theoretical approaches to ritual might have paid dividends here. Despite such quibbles, however, the book delivers the goods : after *Rituals of Manhood* it will simply no longer suffice to glibly allude to male initiations in Melanesia without seriously asking just what on earth these rites mean.

Peter METCALF, *A Borneo Journey into Death*, Philadelphia, The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. 275 pages, US \$23.00 (cloth).

By Dorothy Ayers Counts
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Headhunting ; erotic, drunken funeral parties that last for days ; corpses kept in jars ; ceremonies that involve cleaning the bones of decomposed bodies... This is the stuff of lurid adventure fiction, the kind of exotic customs that titillate *National Geographic* readers : these are some of the elements of the mortuary rites of the Berawan of northern Borneo. Clearly, as Rivers noted in 1926, we cannot rightly assume that death is everywhere experienced in the same way. But, can an anthropologist place these rituals in their cultural context so that they are seen to be the reasonable response of logical people to a different experience of death rather than the bizarre rites of incomprehensible savages ? Metcalf's book is an attempt to communicate the rationale of behaviour which responds to another understanding of death. He succeeds magnificently.

Metcalf decided to focus his research on Berawan mortuary rites precisely because they are exotic and "strikingly different to anything familiar to most Westerners" (p. 19). The rituals are in two stages : the funerals held immediately after death for almost all Berawanese, and the rare secondary disposal of remains. Metcalf presents the material in chronological sequence, describing and discussing the

rituals as they are performed from death to final disposal, perhaps years later. After describing each stage, he discusses it in the context of Berawan notions about what death is and what it means, both to the individual who has died and to his kin and community. The message at each stage is clear : mortuary performances are intended to protect the living.

Metcalf's analysis of Berawan death ritual draws heavily on the work of Robert Hertz, particularly his notion that in societies which practice secondary burial the conditions of the soul and corpse are linked, so that as the body decays the soul becomes increasingly miserable, jealous of the living, and malevolent. The malice of the ghost continues until the bones are dry and the soul is sufficiently pure to be admitted to the land of the dead where it is reunited with the benevolent ancestors. The logic of Berawan rituals is predicated on the assumption that this linkage exists and on the notion that death is a process, not an instant event : it is "a stage in the career of the soul" (p. 46). When these assumptions are understood, the rites make sense. For example, the drinking, gambling, flirting, levity, and noise which go on for days during a funeral do not mean that the rituals are an empty form. The manic quality of the festival is intended to distract the ghost and deflect its malice. One *may* not sleep. One *must* play, night after night, or a vulnerable member of the community—one's own child, perhaps—may die. Therefore the sociality that might suggest to an outsider that people do not take the rituals seriously is, in fact, an expression of their sacredness.

While the other members of the community drink, play games, and celebrate, the spouse of the deceased is dressed in filthy clothes and placed in a tiny cubicle behind a wall of mats where (s)he must remain isolated for days in filth and discomfort. The spouse cannot stretch or lie comfortably to sleep ; (s)he must defecate through a small hole in the floor ; (s)he is given only the poorest of meagre rations ; and (s)he must sit in the stifling heat beside the decomposing corpse for as long as eleven days. However, this discomfort is not a punishment but a defense. The spouse is particularly vulnerable to being taken by a vengeful ghost and must share the fate of the deceased in part so that (s)he will not share it in totality. Similarly, the mud fights, headhunting and other rites of mourning are intended to break the chain of death.

In his analysis of Berawan rituals Metcalf draws upon indigenous statements of dogma and syntheses of belief. There are, of course, difficulties inherent in eliciting this kind of data, and Metcalf explicitly

discusses these problems. Starting with a quote from Robertson Smith that there is no authoritative interpretation in ancient ritual (p. 10), Metcalf goes on to observe that there was no consensus when he phrased questions in terms of ideology ("what is a soul?"), and he comments that it would be a mistake to impose order and consistency where none exists. At time he was able to elicit indigenous analysis only after persistently pressuring his informants. Metcalf frankly discusses the occasions when he applied pressure in order to obtain information and notes the response of his consultants to this pressure.

The result of this study, which is one of a series entitled "Symbol and Culture", is a well written ethnography that is rich in detail and which provides a fascinating insight into the interface between a people's understanding of death and their response to it. It should be a valuable source for anyone interested in Southeast Asia, ritual and metaphor, or the subject of death and dying.

Brenda E.F. BECK, *The Three Twins : the Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982. 248 pages, US \$22.50 (cloth).

By E. Alan Morinis
University of Victoria

About the mid-fifteenth century, agricultural groups seeking to colonize the interior of what is now Tamil Nadu in South India, encountered resistance from the indigenous, forest-dwelling hunters. A great battle ensued in which the hunters were defeated. The bards and poets of the agricultural people sang of the victory and down through the five centuries since the original events took place, a local epic tale has evolved. This epic is the focus of Brenda Beck's *The Three Twins*.

As the subtitle says, the book is concerned with the 'telling' of the epic. The opening chapters provide a synopsis of characters and action, time and setting. We are not given a translation of the epic, but enough detail is supplied so that the plot and personnel become familiar. The picture drawn is a composite of eight sources : the epic as performed and dictated by living bards, ritual enactments of the legend and printed versions. But quickly Dr. Beck tackles the meat of her matter : the epic in its historical and present socio-cultural context.

The connections between the content of the tale and its context are subtle and many, and the author traces these with a sure hand. The most literal level