

Culture



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Book reviews / Comptes rendus

John LEROY, *Kewa Tales*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985. 251 pages, \$25.95 (paper); and *Fabricated World: an Interpretation of Kewa Tales*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985. 319 pages, \$36.00 (cloth).

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Despite the volume of anthropology written about the cultures of Papua New Guinea, we have only a handful of good books dealing with traditional narratives. *Kewa Tales* and *Fabricated World* go a long way towards remedying the situation, the first book containing a rich corpus and the second offering an exemplary analysis. Both books are concerned with a particular genre of Kewa tales called *lidi*; these are unabashed fictions which no Kewa holds to be true. Thus saved the trouble of reducing them to charters, LeRoy views them in a less legalistic and more literary light: like our own fiction, they are products of imagination, spinning worlds of fantasy. The stories are peopled by talking pythons, sneaky skin-changers, provident sky-women and ogres insatiable for human flesh. None of these are part of everyday Kewa experience. But, as LeRoy shows, such characters serve as foils for protagonists who always stand in homespun human relationships. A man finds a benefactor in the form of a magic dog, but sharing the secret with his brother ruins everything, with fratricidal results. A woman smitten by a youth's appearance at a dance is forced to marry a leper, only to find that her husband is simply the youth wearing his everyday skin. A man's quarrel with his sister over marriage precipitates her elopement to a snake husband, a nightmare of affinity gone haywire. The tales explore normal problems of Kewa life through imaginative means. If they are fantasies, they remain specifically *Kewa* fantasies, answering to Kewa realities.

The eighty-odd stories in *Kewa Tales* provide an excellent read and grist for any number of theoretical mills, but the real appeal of LeRoy's work is in the analysis he develops in *Fabricated World*. He works out a method for interpreting the tales that borrows judiciously from Propp and Levi-Strauss and gives every appearance of working. He begins by identify-

ing functions, recurring narrative actions culled from a scan of the corpus. For example, in one tale a brother gets pigs from a pool, while in another a brother receives wives from an old woman; these and other variants are generalized in the function "A Brother benefits from a source of wealth." Through a similar process an episodic structure is mapped out in terms of sequences of functions which approximate kernel plots. These sequences are limited in number, and may themselves be combined in various ways to form particular tales.

LeRoy consistently stresses the intertextual dimension by tacking systematically between different tales of the corpus. In the end, what he does really amounts to an analysis of the corpus as a whole, and this is where he is at his most convincing: whereas one may entertain doubts on the details of particular readings, the accumulated weight of the material is compelling. More than this, it is only when one confronts the corpus as a whole that the elegance and power of his method become apparent, for eleven sequences prove sufficient to take care of the lot. In the course of doing all this, LeRoy manages to tell us a great deal about Kewa culture, and he synthesizes the ethnographic and more purely textual dimensions of the discussion throughout.

In the final portions of the book LeRoy argues that the tales construct an allegorical world built upon certain metaphorical substitutions disseminated throughout the corpus: actors for social relations (e.g., ghosts for affines), bodily state for inner being (e.g., appetite for passion, dry skin for impoverishment), distance for estrangement, and so on. They are thus a species of social analysis operating through images and metaphors. His most striking substantive conclusion is that refractions of death (nonbeing) are the central preoccupation of the tales, where death figures as the negation of what the Kewa hold dear. In these terms, the ensemble of tales constitutes a model not just of social life, but of its vulnerability.

Taken in tandem, these two books promise a good deal of fun: as anyone who's taught a course on mythology knows, it's not often that one has the chance to examine, close-up, a method and its application. Everybody from Levi-Strauss to Calvino has talked about textual interpretation in terms of playing-card metaphors. In LeRoy's case the cards are on the table in open invitation to anybody who'd like to sit in and try their hand.