

BOOK REVIEW

ANDREW MOUTU, *Names are thicker than blood: kinship and ownership among the Iatmul*, Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, x, 218 pp., 2013.

The Iatmul of the Sepik river area of Papua New Guinea may not be that well-known by name, but they deserve to be one of the famous ethnic groups in the anthropological literature. This is thanks largely to Gregory Bateson's study of the Naven of over three quarters of a century ago – a ritual at which the first achievements of a nephew are celebrated by his MB and FZ – which he studied using such unusual concepts as ethos, eidos and schismogenesis. The author of the book reviewed here did not witness a Naven, though it still continues, but focuses instead in his book on initiation rituals and how they are linked to different forms of moiety organization, that is, totemic or descent moieties, and the ritual moieties that cross-cut them. Another, background interest of the study is the fact that the men's house (strictly its successor on the same site) that was at the centre of Bateson's study has become a national icon under the protection of Papua New Guinea's heritage legislation. Moutu himself mostly worked in the same village as Bateson. Moutu is a citizen of Papua New Guinea and a museum curator, Araphesh by birth, but initiated as an Iatmul during his time with them; he was to go on to do both a doctorate and a post-doc at the University of Cambridge under Marilyn Strathern, and this book is the result. One of the strengths of the book is the author's careful consideration of the various impacts that his presence among the Iatmul had on them.

The initiation rituals mentioned above are linked with conflict between the ritual moieties, suppressed in normal time – a corrective to the normal Durkheimian assumption that rituals stress harmony and unity. Many of the conflicts appear to be over matters of ownership, an important theme of the book, as is how naming practices can create or assert claims to ownership; here Simon Harrison's ideas on ritual and intellectual property prove useful, as do Roy Wagner's notion of the 'fractal person' and his use of figure and ground, and we are usefully reminded that with ownership usually goes obligation. However, the stress on conflict seems to run counter to the information, provided elsewhere, that the ritual moieties unite a village, while the totemic moieties divide it. Other dichotomies that are represented and linked to ritual life in various ways include the men's house and women's dwellings (also an expression of unity versus difference), elder brother and younger brother (as links between certain sub-units or sub-categories within moieties, as well as between life and death), patrikin and matrikin, mother and father (especially in relation to the constitution of the body), and sets of alternating generations such that grandfathers and grandsons are equivalent to male ego, his father and son (themselves linked) opposed to him. It is interesting that Moutu does not contest the structuralist model of the Iatmul marriage system put forward by Francis Korn back in the 1970s and originating with Bateson, an unusual model of asymmetric prescriptive alliance premised on marriage between male ego and FMBSD.

However, Moutu's interest in these and other categories is that they tend to be seen as ontological for the Iatmul, not as relational: one does not *represent* an ancestor or mythical being of origin, one *is* such. Heidegger is brought in to support this, which helps develop an anti-creationist position on Moutu's own part, and both James Weiner and Marilyn Strathern are criticized for talking about epistemology where ontology would be more appropriate. The following sentence can be taken as summing up the main argument of the book (p. 202): 'I argue that what distinguishes "relationships" ontologically from the epistemological forms of relation practices – such as connection, association, resemblance, comparison, etc. – is necessity and transcendence, which give "relationships" the character of an infinite being.' Transcendence is indeed another theme that courses throughout the book, enshrined especially in the ritual moieties ultimately, despite their mutual expressions of contestation in rituals mentioned above.

This work is therefore far from being just a restudy of a people who at one time held a quite central position in the anthropological literature. It is grounded in more modern ideas and approaches, and it brings out the original features of Iatmul ethnography through both careful description and apt comparisons with neighbouring groups. It should therefore stand the test of time as a contribution to both Iatmul ethnography and wider anthropological themes such as naming and ownership, epistemology and ontology, representation and transcendence.

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