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Dancing Through Time: A Sepik Cosmology (review)

Joel Robbins

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(Review)

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Dancing Through Time: A Sepik Cosmology, by Borut Telban. Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. ISBN 0-19-823376-0; xii + 270 pages, maps, figures, tables, photographs, appendixes, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. us\$88.

Melanesian cultures are famously diverse. Yet there are some concepts that while not universally distributed throughout the cultures of the region at least appear to be important in a great many of them. Consider, for example, the complex notion of “base, root, cause, reason” that Tok Pisin speakers in Papua New Guinea regularly gloss as *as*. Or, to take an example of more recent origin, think about the widespread importance of ideas about culture and tradition captured in the Tok Pisin *kastam* and its cognates in other Melanesian languages. Because versions of such concepts are important in many cultures, careful ethnographic discussions of them can be very valuable in the development of the anthropology of the region. It is one of the great merits of Telban’s work that he has identified one of these generally important concepts that has received relatively little attention in the literature and has put his discussion of it at the center of an ethnographically rich account of the culture of the Karawari-speaking Ambonwari of the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea.

The concept in question is the one the Ambonwari refer to with the Karawari term *kay*. Telban glosses this term in English as “way, habit, manner; ritual; custom; law; being; canoe” (262). *Kay*’s range of meanings should make it recognizable to many who

have worked in Papua New Guinea as a term that denotes something similar to what Tok Pisin speakers in many other cultures refer to as *pasin*. In examining the central role *kay* plays in articulating many different aspects of Ambonwari culture, Telban offers us the most careful examination of this concept to appear to date.

Telban’s account of *kay* is strikingly original in two respects. First, he situates the understanding of *kay* as personal way, habit, and manner, in relation to other Ambonwari psychological ideas. Key among these is the notion of heart (*wambung*), which is the seat of people’s social understanding and understanding of themselves. Inasmuch as it is through the heart that people take in Ambonwari custom, the heart is part of *kay*. It is also part of *kay* because it provides individuals with their own personal way of doing things. But precisely because one’s heart is part of one’s unique manner of being, each heart also impresses custom with an individual stamp. This produces a model of tradition that is capable of recognizing change. As Telban puts it, for the Ambonwari, “[h]eart is the means of *kay*’s [custom’s] self-transformation” (66).

The second novel aspect of Telban’s examination of the operations of *kay* in Ambonwari culture is his analysis of the way *kay* relates domains of life that are in other ways distinct. In Ambonwari, the notion of *kay*, like that of *pasin* elsewhere, can refer to the way of the ancestors, the way of the village, and to the idiosyncratic ways of particular individuals. This allows *kay* to articulate relations between these levels, giving them scope to inform each other, much as

custom and heart inform each other in Ambonwari psychological conceptualization. Furthermore, it allows *kay* to bind different kinds of time (ancestral, historical, personal) into a workable whole that provides the context of Ambonwari lives.

Telban lays out this careful analysis of *kay* primarily in the early parts of the book (though he returns to his analysis and enriches it in almost every chapter). He then links *kay* to two other concepts: that of path or marriage (*konggong*) and that of speech, story, or myth (*mariawk*). With these three concepts as a base, he offers accounts of clanship, naming systems, kinship, marriage, mythology, and religion. All of these discussions are marked both by their attention to detail and by their clarity, and they will prove valuable to regional specialists.

At various points throughout the book, Telban discusses the intersection of *kay* and Ambonwari conceptions of time, and these discussions make temporality a key theme of the book as a whole. Yet even as Telban's considerations of temporality are stimulating and deserve the attention of those interested in temporality and historicity, I have focused this review on his analysis of *kay* because it is this that provides the book's most sustained focus. By laying out the complexity of the concept of *kay* and showing why it is so central to Ambonwari culture, Telban has written a book that should stimulate many others who work among people who employ similar concepts to rethink their own understandings of the nature of such notions and of the way they tie together individual action, custom, and history, to

create the life-worlds of the people they study.

JOEL ROBBINS

University of California, San Diego

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Stories from the Marshall Islands:

Bwebwenato Jān Aelōn Kein,

by Jack A Tobin. PALI Language

Texts: Micronesia. Honolulu:

University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

ISBN cloth, 0-8248-2545-4; paper,

0-8248-2019-3; xiii + 405 pages,

maps, appendixes, notes, bibliography,

index. Written in English and

Marshallese. Cloth, US\$55.00,

paper, US\$19.95.

Narratives can make or break a people. At stake are traditioning, identity formation, and cultural creativity. People who forget their own stories risk living out someone else's story.

Stories from the Marshall Islands reveals a treasure held in trust for the next generation by an anthropologist. Jack Tobin has been involved with Marshallese people for a lifetime. He has been a student, a participant observer, and an advisor, but always a recorder of culture. Now, through narratives, he opens a door to Marshallese identity and spirituality. We have been waiting many years for this work.

This volume is a collection of stories that were recorded between 1950 and 1975. Tobin arrived on Arno atoll in 1950, as a student working with Leonard Mason on the Scientific Investigation of Micronesia project. Later that year, he was hired as an anthropological field consultant attached to the Civil Administration