

William R. Merrifield et al., Gods, Heroes, Kinsmen:
Ethnographic Studies from Irian Jaya, Indonesia.

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Ethnographic studies of "exotic" cultures in different parts of the world continue to provide valuable insights into different aspects of traditional epistemologies. The contributions contained in the publication under review are no exception. The book is the outcome of a cooperative effort by a team of SIL members working in the eastern Indonesian province of Irian Jaya in collaboration with the province's Cenderawasih (Bird-of-Paradise) University. It was edited by Merrifield, Gregerson and Ajamiseba and was jointly published by Cenderawasih University and the International Museum of Cultures in Dallas, Texas.

This book sets out to achieve two central objectives. Firstly, it attempts to make available ethnographic information on seven randomly selected West Irian communities (viz; the Bauzi, Berik, Iaw, Isirawa, Mairasi, Tabla and the Wandamen), information which it is hoped will be especially useful to those interacting with these local communities in their respective sociocultural contexts. Equally important to the first is the second aim which is concerned with the documenting and recording traditional knowledge, knowledge which is likely to be lost if members of these communities do not attempt to maintain it alongside introduced cultural values of the mainstream Indonesian community. The book contains thirteen chapters and is divided into two parts.

Part one deals with gods and heroes. There are contributions by Kalmbacher, Oguri, Ongkodharma and Nelwan, Peckham and Westrum.

These contributions are largely quantitative in nature. The authors deal with a variety of descriptions pertinent to ritual, magic, creative deities, culture heroes, causes of illnesses and herbal cures that can or may be applied to prevent or cure physical or mental ailments. For those who are familiar with other Melanesian ethnographic studies, the subject matter dealt with here may serve merely to reinforce what they already know. In this respect, there is little in the book's contents that is really astounding. What the section does achieve however, and which is worth acknowledging, is the provision of additional knowledge on less well described communities of West Irian which appear to share much of their cultural values with other Melanesian communities, especially those of the Sepik region in Papua New Guinea. Unfortunately one of the articles, a rather long one of forty-four pages, is in Bahasa Indonesia so that its contents are likely to remain inaccessible to those like myself who do not know Bahasa Indonesia.

A particular contribution in this section that ethnomusicologists who specialize in Melanesian music may find useful is the one by Hiroko Oguri. This author briefly examines the Isirawa music categories. The same author also discusses the attitudes this community has towards its different traditional music types and their mythical origins. Of special significance perhaps is the author's attempt to represent the Isarawa musical rhythm on a notational scale and to specify it as "anhemitonic pentatonic" characterised by "a five tone scale without half steps" (p.43). It would have been more insightful had the author provided more details on the formal description of the music rather than on the ABCs.

The chapter on Mairasi world view by Lloyd Peckham attracted my interest as someone interested in this subject. Unfortunately, the author does not provide a holistic description of it. Instead he merely describes the category 'person' whose componential values or elements were vaguely treated. Consequently, one is left

wondering about how the category 'person' is related to the total cosmic view and the folk taxonomy of the Mairasi.

Part two of the book deals with kinship systems and marriage patterns. It is introduced by Merrifield who briefly presents a notational system which he initially developed and used to analyze and compare sixty-five Otomanguean kinship terminologies of Mexico. The authors in this section of the book use this model as a guide when describing Iau, Tabla, Wandamen, Mairasi and Berik kinship and marriage systems. The Melanesian scholar may wish to question the validity of the much too common tendency among scholars to impose as it were models which may appear tenable in terms of their descriptive power in delineating certain facts in a certain cultural milieu but which may not necessarily be relevant to apply to describe the views and cultural facts of a radically different culture.

Despite that reservation, however, it appears from the writings of the authors in this part of the volume that the kinship notational model used does seem to provide descriptively adequate descriptions of the kinship systems discussed. On the other hand one is still concerned about the rule formalisms that the authors in this part use when attempting to delineate simple facts about the kinship systems. If the aim of the book is to avail itself to a broad laymen readership within and outside Indonesia, then, one may ask, why obfuscate the findings by using models that look like mathematical games? Descriptions of facts in plain language are needed if the ultimate aims of books such as this are to be realized. Hopefully this concern will be borne in mind in any future publication of ethnographic studies of the people of West Irian and other traditional communities of this region.

In summary then this publication contains a lot of useful ethnographic information. The kinship systems described in section two accentuate one basic fact -- they provide part of the psychological base which helps individuals function as amiable

members of their communities. For those interested in the general comparative typological information on West Irian communities vis-a-vis other Melanesian communities, this book is worth reading although the general layout and treatment of some papers leaves much to be desired. Thus there is no proper introduction on how the book is divided up and although the articles in part two are preceded by one page or less summaries in Bahasa Indonesia for the non-English speaking Indonesian readers and vice versa for the one written in Bahasa Indonesia in part one, these summary translations appear inadequate for they seem to miss out on a lot of essential information.