

De Verne Reed Smith, *Palauan Social Structure*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983. Pp. xx, 348, maps, figures, tables, glossary, references, index. \$35.00.

On the endcovers, two prominent anthropologists praise this book as a detailed, well organized, and theoretically advanced work. Their praise is truly earned: this is in many ways a good account of social

structure. Smith draws on anthropological traditions to confront the complexity of Palauan social life and does much to clarify matters. But the question remains: how much can a social-structural account tell us about Palau?

Palau, now the Republic of Belau, has puzzled many outsiders. While their Yapese neighbors to the north appear conservative, Palauans have been quick to embrace new social and economic opportunities. While traditional authorities in most Caroline Islands societies have little visibility in contemporary politics, the young Aibedul of Koror has appeared on American television in opposition to the presence of nuclear materials on Palau. While the social systems of neighboring groups have been described in fairly precise ways in terms of standard anthropological categories, the literature on Palau is more vague, qualified, and, in the end, unsatisfactory. Is this because of a situation of social flux? Earlier analysts have suggested that much of Palauans' willingness to innovate proceeds from a dedication to time-honored competitive ends. Smith goes further, to argue that much of the complexity of Palauan social life is structurally based.

The heart of the book is an account of kin relations and units. Smith moves from introductory accounts of *telungalek* property-holding units and *kebliil* clans to detailed discussions of the negotiation of kin ties. She shows that cross-siblingship is not simply a type of role-relation. On Palau, cross-sibling ties can be created and developed in several ways and are central to the organization of groups and events. Hence cross-siblingship deserves the status of a structural principle, alongside descent and exchange. Dealing with exchange, Smith gives clear descriptions of transfers of food, land, and valuables. She discusses marriage and adoption as transactions and as points at which the interests and strategies of many concerned parties intersect. The account of different types of adoption is exhaustive, for this topic allows Smith to specify both relationships between classes of actors and processes whereby actors can be promoted within landholding units.

For the reader who finds confusing Palauans' ability to juggle exchange ties and to change the definition of relationships among kin, the chapter on death and "final decisions" is reassuring. After a person dies, kinsmen must resolve the network of kin ties, debts, and obligations that the deceased activated. At this point, these relationships are reviewed and confirmed or broken. Much as in Trobriand life (Weiner 1976), mortuary exchanges provide a context for social accounting.

This review skims over many detailed descriptions in Smith's book. It suffices to show that Smith emphasizes the juncture between continuing

structures and particular events of transaction. She deals with actors' attempts to consolidate and advance their place in Palauan society, but in so doing she suggests how ties between *telungalek* and *kebliil* can be understood.

One virtue of Smith's work is her attention to polysemy. Instead of rigidly importing analytical glosses for Palauan concepts, Smith patiently reviews, for example, *telungalek* as units of people linked by blood, by property, and by residence. Similarly, she raises the question of male versus female power, identifies the different contexts in which men and women control others, and provides a balanced summary. In these two areas of anthropological dispute, Smith's work is hardly ground-breaking, but it is descriptively strong.

Theoretically, Smith draws on the revision of a classic tradition proposed by Kelly (1977). She treats "social structure" as her analytic objective, but faults classic British models of social structure as overly rigid and static. Kelly argues that a contradiction between two structural principles is central to Etoro society; on Palau, Smith identifies three such principles and shifting relations among them. She proposes that the principles combine synergistically in different ways in different contexts. Smith does not pretend to have a definitive model of every possible interaction among principles and every context, much less a formula for specifying how such interactions amount, over time, to a social order.

Her approach is just intricate enough to allow her to illuminate complex data, without making overblown claims--unless the very terms she uses presuppose such claims. To this reader, the notion of social structure she uses is problematic. The concept of social organization proposed by Firth (1964) as an alternative to social structure seems more promising. This is because Firth allowed for both the attention to social process and the critical view of rigid models notable in Smith's work. Smith's "principles" would hardly be congenial to Firth's empiricist style of analysis, but that is a minor matter. What deserves emphasis here is that social anthropologists are uncertain of the fruitfulness of the several concepts labeled "social structure" and are engaged in yet another reformulation of the term. Smith's book contributes to that project, but it is burdened somewhat by the jargon and the ambiguities inherent in the project. Her concepts of synergy and structural principles are helpful but, given the state of the art, understandably somewhat opaque.

The book is limited in significant ways. The difficulty of the subject matter makes the exposition slow, although Smith's writing is usually

lucid. Despite an emphasis on social processes and a bow toward Palauan history, the account is ahistorical. We learn little in detail about Palauan history, and less about contemporary social and political changes. While Smith suggests that municipal and archipelago political processes are founded on the elements and principles she examines, they are beyond the scope of the present book. Consequently, few readers other than specialists will find answers to their questions about Palau. As an anthropologist puzzled by Palauans' dazzling adaptations to new conditions, I am somewhat disappointed by the omissions in Smith's book. But then, no scholar can be expected to keep up with, much less explain, all the complexities of social order and change in contemporary Palau.

### REFERENCES

- Firth, Raymond. 1964. *Essays on Social Organization and Values*. LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology, No. 28. London: Athlone.
- Kelly, Raymond C. 1977. *Etoro Social Structure*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Weiner, Annette B. 1976. *Women of Value, Men of Renown*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

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