

Roger M. Keesing, *Kwaio Religion: The Living and the Dead in a Solomon Island Community*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Pp. xi, 257, figures, illustrations, glossary, references. \$28.00. Paper \$14.00

In island Melanesia and Polynesia there are few societies in which a traditional religion survived into the twentieth century, available for investigation, description, and analysis by anthropologists. As a result, our knowledge of oceanic Austronesian religious beliefs and their practice, either among the various individual societies or in a more general comparative sense, is not very extensive. In the Solomon Islands, missionaries such as Fox and Ivens provided fairly detailed accounts of traditional religion among those Melanesian societies they were in the process of Christianizing, while the anthropologist Firth produced his now classic study of the Polynesian religion of Tikopia just prior to total conversion. Thus an intensive, long-term, and highly analytical study of religion among the bush or inland Kwaio of the central part of the island of Malaita--one of the few societies to retain its indigenous beliefs--is a welcome addition to an otherwise meager literature.

Kwaio Religion is not an extensive descriptive account of the magical procedures and formulas, the rites and ritual performances, or their symbolic meanings as they are still carried out by this one remaining non-Christian society in the rapidly Westernizing and now independent Solomon Islands. Rather the book is a short and incisive interpretative summary, deriving from copious data obtained by Keesing during seven stays with the Kwaio, and totalling some five years of fieldwork over the course of the last seventeen years. In fact, Keesing explicitly states that "it would

take volumes to describe the complicated sequences and procedures of Kwaio ritual in full detail." Moreover, religion is not a category the bush Kwaio would themselves distinguish from other kinds of knowledge and procedures; it is part of and central to every aspect of their lives. Its separation in this book is imposed by the author for analytical purposes. Moreover, it includes magic, a category the Kwaio do distinguish from other kinds of knowledge about the sacred because it constitutes property, can be bought and sold, and is supposed to achieve its ends even when the performer is not related to the ancestor from whom it comes. Thus under the rubric religion, Keesing includes the whole array of magico-religious acts and beliefs, a category that Gilbert Lewis and many others now refer to as ritual, where ritual not only has its primary meaning--a mode of action or collective work for social ends--but also its symbolic sense of a system of communication associated with various implicit or explicit cosmological structures.

Keesing's account opens with an introduction to and elaboration on the spirit world of Kwaio: their encounters with the *adalo* or ancestors who permeate every aspect of their lives, from their social structure and economics to their customary law and politics. We perceive *adalo* as the young child comes to learn about them. We learn of the powers, nature, and origin of the *adalo* and their relation to "mana" (*nanama*) as a process or state (and not, as is so often supposed, a supernatural force or substance). We are instructed in the ways that Kwaio descent groups and their shrines are tied together in complex genealogical networks that link the living closely with the dead and to the land. Shrines and the rites propitiating the ancient ancestors with sacrifices of pigs in Keesing's view "provide a kind of mapping of the history of social relationships, an enactment of the past as it continues in the present." In the same way, the layout and structure of each settlement may be an expression of a subtle conceptual scheme of sacred (*abu*) and profane (*mola*), realm of men and realm of women, up and down, right and left, and so on. Keesing carefully elucidates this while noting that the Kwaio themselves appear to have one of the least fully developed cosmological and mythic systems of Malaita. Thus here and elsewhere throughout the book he is constantly torn between the more coherent and integrated structural and symbolic systems that he is able to impose on the data, and the fact that such systemization often goes un verbalized by even the most sophisticated and knowledgeable of his informants. At one point this leads him to make a most interesting general observation:

Kwaio have a self-centric perspective such that they are interested not in a global view of the total universe, but rather in ancestral interventions that affect *them*. (Indeed, a fundamental contrast between religions of classless tribal societies and religions of class-stratified societies seems to lie in this perspectival, as opposed to universal, view. The latter view has characteristically been a product of priestly classes devoted to systematizing a cosmology into a theology).

Later chapters in the book expand on kinds of adalo and the different powers they possess, how a few adalo rise to long-term prominence, and how one interacts with ancestors through divination, in curing, and by sacrifice, especially of pigs. Death has its own chapter, as the associated rituals vary greatly: those very limited in their sociological and religious consequences are for young children; rituals for adults are far more complex, especially as they gain in age and status; and the most elaborate ones are reserved for the death of a descent group's priest. It is the ceremony for the last, and the associated concept of *mamu*, the power to attract wealth, that is the most fully described of the rituals in the book.

In the more analytical chapters that end the book, the sociology of Kwaio ritual is again touched on briefly, and the symbolism associated with it is more fully developed. In this latter area Keesing urges caution because ritual is not seen just as a system of communication, with some meanings that are transparent and commonly perceived by all, and others that are consciously formulated only by a few or not at all; rather, and more importantly in Kwaio eyes, ritual is also seen as a mode of performance for achieving particular social outcomes. For their ability to explicate ritual meaning he assigns Kwaio a middle position in the Melanesian continuum. This is in line with an important following chapter, which explores the sociology of knowledge in their society: who knows what; how they achieve access to that knowledge; the different roles of men and women, young and old in religious acts; and the ability of the few ritual experts, men and women, not only to interpret but to preserve and modify that knowledge and so create new symbolic structures to accompany changes in the rites. Keesing is thus warning us against those anthropologists who would create a composite, coherent, and intellectually tidy scheme of symbols and meanings labeled as the religious system of the culture.

These chapters lead to the final theme of the book, that of change. Here Keesing applies his theory of the "political economy of knowledge," arguing that to fully understand change in human communities one must

approach culture from two well known anthropological points of view--ambiguous though each may be in respect to the other. One view stresses culture as a public and shared symbolic system independent of individuals; the other sees it situated in individuals' minds and knowledge, and, in a political context, as a generalization of what individuals themselves know that enables them to live successfully in a human community. Here Keesing examines closely the divergent and potentially conflicting interests of men and women, and of young and old, where senior Melanesian men use both the structures of kinship and their control of sacred knowledge to maintain their control of earthly politics, especially their power over female labor and younger men. Kwaio sexual politics, male and female roles therein, and the transformation that took place during the colonial period--when young men increasingly went off to stints of plantation labor, and warfare and revenge killing were quelled as a major cultural institution--are all explored as the means by which the ancestors' rules remain. Yet their practice has changed, often dramatically. It is in this context that Keesing attempts to determine why the bush Kwaio have remained religious traditionalists, while their coastal one-talks and all their neighbors have become Christian. It is, he finds, not just a matter of their environmental location, isolation, and lack of development and education; it is also because of the satisfaction of the traditional system itself, and a part of the political struggle to retain their cultural identity and autonomy. It is a means of avoiding the alienation from their past, their cultural heritage, so evident among their Malaitan neighbors, and so prevalent among many of those communities that now make up the newly independent Solomon Islands.

Kwaio Religion is an important book for several reasons. First, it greatly extends our knowledge of religion in an eastern oceanic Austronesian society where modern accounts are few. Second, the analysis draws on recent anthropological concepts and theories in the field of religion to illuminate and organize this data in an economical and lucid fashion. Finally, the book succeeds because it explicitly attempts a delicate balancing act between two schools of thought: those who would treat the study of tribal religion mainly as the exposition of a coherent, collective symbol system; and those who would either turn it into its diverse empirical components residing in individuals, or portray it as some sort of ideological veil of illusion disguising the nature and ensuring the perpetuation of the social and political order. The balancing act may not always seem successful in the compass of this short book (one continuously wants to know more), but this reviewer is satisfied that the rich corpus of data gathered

by Keesing has been treated with more sympathy, circumspection, and subtlety than might otherwise have been the case had he pursued a more singular analytical paradigm.

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