
REVIEWS

William E. Mitchell, ed., *Clowning as Critical Practice: Performance Humor in the South Pacific*. ASAO Monograph, no. 13. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993. Pp. x, 227, bibliography, index. US\$39.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

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As any comic can attest, clowning is serious business. *Clowning as Critical Practice* is a serious study of performance humor in the southwestern Pacific. It provides an extended, systematic treatment of this potentially important, yet underappreciated topic, and as such is a welcome addition to the Pacific ethnographic record.

The volume consists of an introductory essay and seven substantive ethnographic chapters. Five chapters deal with Papua New Guinean communities: Murik of East Sepik Province (Kathleen Barlow), Lusi Kaliai of New Britain (David Counts and Dorothy Counts), North Mekeo of Gulf Province (Mark Mosko), Tubetube in the Massim region (Martha Macintyre), and Wape of the Toricelli Mountains (William Mitchell). Two chapters focus upon Polynesian communities: Rotuma (Vilsoni Hereniko) and Samoa (Caroline Sinavaiana). Insider perspectives from Hereniko and Sinavaiana are particularly welcome.

None of the chapters attempts to break new methodological ground. Rather, the volume's strength is in its ethnographic data and careful analysis. Theoretically, the authors' approaches are eclectic, drawing upon functionalist, structuralist, symbolic, psychological, and other well-established analytical traditions, combining them in ways that seem appropriate to their particular data sets.

The geographical distribution of case material, while heavily skewed toward Papua New Guinea, is reasonable for a first venture into largely

uncharted intellectual territory. Clowning may have been defined somewhat *more* broadly than one would wish. Each chapter focuses on some form of performance humor, but the contexts range from weddings and funerals to commercial performances in schools and theaters, and the activities range from clever monologues to riddles and slapstick. Nonetheless, some common themes emerge.

Pacific Island clowning frequently occurs during rites of passage. It often is associated with food and involves gender-role reversal. It speaks to local notions of personhood and the relationship between human and spirit worlds. Clowns are able to break normal rules of etiquette with relative impunity. In the process, they call attention to those individuals who flout community standards, and in doing so, pressure them back into conformity. They may also promote social control by assisting in release of pent-up psychic tensions that would otherwise be difficult to express without being disruptive. Although in some respects they are a conservative force, they also provide a relatively safe mechanism for expressing criticism of persons in positions of power, such as pastors, chiefs, and government officials. This aspect of clowning offers a venue for political criticism and mobilization of popular sentiment against the powers that be, making it, as indicated in the volume's title, a form of critical practice.

The first chapter is a theoretical introduction by the editor. This useful review of cross-cultural approaches to the study of laughter, humor, and clowning is historical and interdisciplinary, reflecting particularly upon anthropological, psychological, and philosophical contributions.

Barlow's chapter on the Murik addresses a joking relationship between classificatory fathers' sisters and brothers' daughters, which is particularly evident in the context of funerary activities. The author suggests that such joking is a mechanism for cultural learning in light of contradictory demands affecting lives of Murik women and that it emphasizes the continuity of social structure despite the loss of individual community members through death.

David and Dorothy Counts explore a distinction between "ritual" and "informal" clowning among the Lusi Kaliai. Ritual clowning occurs in association with major rites of passage and is a formal part of the proceedings. It typically involves gender reversal and mocks general classes (e.g., warriors, young men, chiefs, and Europeans). Informal clowning is more likely to target a specific individual as representative of a disapproved category, may take place almost anywhere, and is more or less impromptu. The authors suggest that ritual clowning expresses women's ambivalence at having their children grow up, move

out of their homes, and become exposed to the risks of adult life. In the context of marriage ceremonies, it also expresses the implicit tension between affinally related families. And Kaliai clowning in general provides a relatively safe mechanism through which the weak are able to retaliate against the powerful.

Mosko examines mortuary feasting among the North Mekeo. He unpacks the messages symbolically encoded in clowning at these feasts, demonstrating the place of performance humor in Mekeo exchange and ultimately its role in the process of social reproduction.

Macintyre describes female jesting in a variety of formal and informal contexts on Tubetube. She argues that the clown is the positive counterpart of the witch, bringing the community together in times of stress and gently castigating socially inappropriate behavior.

Mitchell's ethnographic chapter points to parallels between clowning among the Wape and "carnival" activities in other parts of the world. Much like Macintyre and the Counts, he distinguishes between "sacral" or ritual and secular "theatrical" clowning. As is true of carnival performances elsewhere, Wape clowning is subversive in the sense that normal behaviors are inverted and ordinary restraints dissolved, thus exposing the status quo by "showing it to be subjective and arbitrary" (p. 157).

Hereniko focuses on female clowning at Rotuman weddings. The clown is typically an elderly woman who provides entertainment through public ridicule, comporting herself in a high-handed way, ordering others around, contravening normal Rotuman values, and calling into question the basis for social stratification. At the same time, however, she is a conservative force, allowing people to express unresolved tensions and frustrations while reminding leaders of the limits to their authority.

Sinavaiana, in the final chapter, deals with a type of Samoan comedy sketch termed *fale aitu*, "spirit house," which is popular not only in Samoa but among Samoans in New Zealand and the United States. *Fale aitu* are elaborately scripted performances combining slapstick, burlesque, (sometimes) gender-role reversal, and merciless satire, often directed against pastors, chiefs, senior kin, or other prominent personages. As such, they provide a "socially sanctioned vehicle for overtly criticizing authority figures through the protective frame of theater" (p. 193).

The contributions to this volume are solid ethnography, combined at times with subtle and sophisticated analyses. Given the subject matter, the book seems short on illustrations. Photographs, in particular, would

have been useful since so much of a clown's effectiveness depends on visual performance, and a number of contributors lament the difficulty of capturing the essence of performance humor on the printed page. Production is somewhat marred by typographical errors and works cited in the text that fail to appear in the lists of references. On the positive side, the volume's potential value as a reference work is enhanced by the inclusion of a five-page index, a luxury sometimes omitted from edited volumes.