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## REVIEWS

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Alfred Gell, *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1993. Pp. xi, 347, 36 figs., bibliography, index. US\$49.95 cloth.

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A much respected Melanesianist, Gell says that he turned to the study of Polynesian tattooing while working up some lectures on the anthropology of art. Initial examination indicated "that the distribution of different types of tattooing . . . did not simply reflect the existence of a prior socio-political milieu, but, in certain instances, and in combination with certain other factors, was actually constitutive of it" (p. 3). At one level his book explores this proposition.

Gell has not written ethnohistory. Stressing how fragmentary are the data, "often maddeningly divorced from any kind of context" (p. 42), he defines his period of study, somewhat loosely, "as the Bibles-and-muskets epoch of Pacific ethnohistory" (p. 43), which, as he remarks, could have led to an efflorescence of tattooing, especially among the chiefly elite (a situation, incidentally, that might have enriched the historical record without illuminating it). This book, though, is much more than the application of certain contemporary anthropological theories to the study of an intriguing ethnographical phenomenon. Employing a sweep through the literature reminiscent of the writings of Goldman and Sahlins, Gell has produced a detailed examination of the major different manifestations of tattooing in "traditional" Polynesia, together with an often equally detailed consideration "of the wider institutional forms within which tattooing was embedded" (p. 1).

The book has a long theoretical introduction, developed from the proposition that Polynesian tattooing was "a species of political gesture" (p. 3), involving physical subjection expressive of an obligatory hierarchy and domination. The latter (a recurrent theme throughout the book) leads Gell to his major theoretical concept, that of an epidemiology of tattooing, "invoking Sperber's (1985) proposal for an 'epidemiology of cultural representations' " (p. 19). Gell's "basic schema of tattooing" is seen as amenable to this approach because its pattern of occurrence resembles the uneven but predictable incidence of an illness (pp. 19-20). Thus Gell can treat the skin as a symbolic form, to be correlated with the ideas of Anzieu concerning the "nine functions of the skin ego" (pp. 30-31), "a source of orienting ideas" that Gell uses as an "armature" to emphasize, for example, the Polynesian--specifically Marquesan--notion of being armored by tattoo: "And what tattooing reveals . . . is an inside which comes from the outside, which has been applied externally prior to being absorbed into the interior. The basic schema of tattooing is thus definable as the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior" (pp. 38-39).

Gell's ethnographic survey moves from west to east following the conventional sequence of settlement revealed by archaeology: Fiji with western Polynesia, then the main groups and islands of central and "outer eastern Polynesia." As I have indicated, his treatment is detailed and wide-ranging, inappropriate to paraphrase even summarily here except when specific comment seems called for. It is important to stress, instead, that Gell's overall intention is to develop a cumulative theoretical argument arising from his interpretations of the ethnography. So consideration of Fiji and western Polynesia culminates in the statement of six general principles to be carried forward for consideration in an eastern Polynesian context. For example, principle 6 includes as one of the functions of tattooing the inculcation "of a type of subjectivity adapted to the overall processes of social reproduction" (p. 121). This is later exemplified, for instance, by the position of the Tahitian Arioi, "a repressed subculture . . . encapsulated within the upper echelons of Moahi [*sic*] society" (p. 162).

These progressively integrating arguments are characteristic of the book. Tattooing is recognized not only for itself but also as a metaphor for, or echo of, other elements of culture, which can give Gell's text an intriguing freshness. Where the evidence is full, his analysis can shine, for example with regard to the Marquesas, representing "in striking chiaroscuro, one very intelligible configuration of the basic givens of Lapita-derived Oceanic cultures" (p. 164). One example of this configuration is the iconography of Marquesan sculpture, which "is particularly rich in doubled images of divinities. . . . There can be no doubt that the doubling of the person via the *mata*

*Komoe* [death's head] design stemmed from the same deep currents in Polynesian cosmological thought as produced the western Polynesian twins myths, and the proliferation of sculptural images of Siamese-twin divinities throughout Polynesia. In effect this motif represents the ideal of personhood" (p. 197).

The Marquesan death's head tattooing motif links with the themes of a synthesis of unity and multiplicity, of continuity and discontinuity within a single encompassing divine power (cf. the back-to-back position of the Siamese-twin design [pp. 70-72]). Allied to such pervasive symbolism is the idea of wrapping something valuable within a protective cover: hence "wrapping in images" (p. 163). For years, incidentally, I have puzzled over the meaning of Janus-headed Maori godsticks. Now, thanks to Gell's discussion of western Polynesian and Marquesan analogues, they make more sense, not least because their hafts were carefully bound (encompassed) with strings of flax. And this is the place to say that, with some reservations illustrated below, I find Gell's treatment of Maori tattooing (*moko*) generally sensitive to its cultural setting. "These masks of vengeance and vindictiveness were designed to impress and to overwhelm, and no doubt they did. . . . Of all Polynesian polities [the Maori] was the most confrontational" (p. 244).

Gell's last chapter signals a return to the concept raised in chapter 1: the epidemiology of tattooing. Is there evidence in the material reviewed, he asks, of "intelligible co-variation" (p. 288)? His answer is yes, demonstrated by what he terms an "abstract summation" diagram (p. 290: fig. 7.1; cf. pp. 295-296). Here an inclined "plane of maximal tattooing" is represented diagrammatically within a matrix of three polarities regarded as typical of Polynesian political systems: conical, feudal, and devolved. The latter are depicted horizontally, while variations of intensity are shown vertically (amplified: upwards; attenuated: downwards). But Gell then faces a dilemma resulting from this analysis. It "is necessary both to accommodate the multiplicity of tattooing as a symbolic form . . . and at the same time to preserve, as far as possible, the unity of tattooing as an externally recognizable category" (p. 303). Gell's solution is to set out the variations that he perceives to exist within "the basic schema" of Polynesian tattooing in terms of the technical processes necessary for the operation itself and their after-effects on the body. The latter, though always present, have different emphases of importance in different societies. Thus the variations can be set out under the sequential categories of (1) wounding/bleeding, (2) healing, and (3) indelibly marking; and each Polynesian society can be categorized according to its own particular emphasis. So Tahiti is placed in category 1, Samoa in category 2, and the Maori in category 3.

Inevitably a reviewer will have different interpretations or emphases from those maintained by an author, especially when considering such a comprehensive subject tackled so ambitiously. My concerns relate particularly to the ethnography, mindful of Gell's above-quoted comment of its frequent lack of context. At the same time I do find on occasion that Gell's determination "to range quite widely over the field of Polynesian studies" (p. 1) can be tortuous and over-elaborate. For example, he devotes much attention to demonstrating that the Kaeppler/Kirch model of tattoo distribution in Fiji and western Polynesia "is inconsistent with certain facts" (p. 114). But why make the counterargument (pp. 113-120) so complicated? Incidentally, when discussing the traditional origin of the Fale Fisi, Gell gives the Tu'i Tonga the name of his daughter, Sinaitakala (p. 115; cf. Bott 1982:32; Kaeppler 1971:182-183). He also characterizes the "institutionalized misalliance" between the Tu'i Tonga Fefine and the Fijian, Tapu'osi, thus creating the Fale Fisi, as a "status sink" where excess status is poured away "into a bottomless pit of Fijian inferiority" (p. 116). This is, I suggest, an emotive description, given that the name Tapu'osi means "termination of a prohibition" (Rogers 1977:178), signifying the freeing of the Tu'i Tonga Fefine from celibacy and that thereafter the children of the Tu'i Tonga Fefine and her "Fijian" husband "had higher rank than the Tu'i Tonga . . . but no political authority as rulers" (Bott 1982:33; cf. Bott 1981:32).

Tumakoha, the highest *tohunga* of the Arawa, possessed such high *tapu* to require no *moko*, illustrating Gell's "primary hypothesis" that "those who are close to the gods are not tattooed; those who prefer to keep them at a distance, are" (p. 261). This is an appealing argument, demonstrated by the examples not only of Tumakoha, but also of the tattoo-free sacred paramount chiefs of western Polynesia and the chief of Ua Pou in the Marquesas (p. 210). So Gell can write of "the hubristic motive, setting man, the tattooed creature, against the untattooed, clear-skinned gods" (p. 217). But, in terms of ethnographically defined practice, how far can one take this principle of opposition?

The Maori data are not as clear-cut as Gell thinks. He agrees that "there are plenty of instances of known *tohunga* who had *moko*-tattooing" (p. 262), so were *they* "close to the gods" or not? There seems no means of knowing, given the extent that nineteenth-century Pakeha disruptions rendered uncertain the reliability of Maori "tradition." In support of his case Gell cites two other examples of *tohunga* bereft of *moko*. In one he highlights the remarks of John Savage that Maoris "intended for the performance of their religious ceremonies have only a small square patch of tattooing over the right eye" (Savage 1807:47), "whose significance in the present context [says

Cell] can hardly be overestimated” (p. 261). Perhaps so. But it is hard to equate even limited *moko*, albeit not around the mouth, with non-*moko*. Moreover, Savage wrote of Maoris *intended as performers*, which could mean that they were trainees or acolytes—hence their limited *moko*.

Gell’s other example is also unsatisfactory. He says that Tarapipi, a Ngati Haua chief and clever Land Wars politician, was both a lifelong pagan and never tattooed (p. 262), and guesses that, he was a *tohunga*. I have not been able to obtain access to the only source Gell refers to, a biography by L. Rickard (which would seem to be one listed in other bibliographies with a different title). However, according to Stokes (1990:516), Tarapipi, or Tarapipipi, assumed the names Wiremu Tamihana (William Thompson) when converted to Christianity in 1839. He had been a considerable warrior, succeeding his father as chief for that reason. According to Simmons (1986:79, a source used elsewhere by Gell), Tarapipipi was depicted by the artist G. F. Angas in 1844 grasping a *tewhatewha* (club), his *moko* clearly visible.

Gell sees further support for his case concerning the sanctity of the peaceful and tattoo-free by reference to the Moriori (pp. 268-270, here called Moriri). They were not tattooed; according to their Maori conquerors (and so a biased source) they were highly *tapu*, and in their own estimation were a peaceful people. However, the last attribute was disputed by Skinner, in his authoritative study (1923), as “hard to reconcile with their traditions which are full of accounts of fighting, and with the accounts of their warlike behavior given by Broughton and Johnstone, the first Europeans to land on Chatham Island. . . . It would be easy for [the Islanders] to attribute their defeat to peaceableness, a virtue to which their conquerors could lay no claim” (Skinner 1923:42). Incidentally, Gell is incorrect to say that the Morioris were forcibly removed by the Maoris to the mainland (pp. 269-270). On the contrary, they were allowed to die off *in situ*.

I make these comments having in mind particularly Gell’s remark that his book is in part “a general introduction to Polynesian culture and society” (p. 1), which, if only for reasons indicated in this review, it is not. Certainly it contains valuable insights, especially at an interisland comparative level, and Gell’s arguments are often sophisticated, giving them a stimulating edge. At times, however, they are theoretically abstruse, while his command of the ethnography can be idiosyncratic, even unreliable. The book has a surprisingly high quota of textual errors, ranging from minor slips to mistakes in transcribed quotations, sufficient at times to read as paraphrases. It is frustrating, for example, to find that “Bloch 1988” on p. 207 is not listed in the bibliography (which also has its share of mistakes), the context of which suggests that this should be “Thomas 1988.” The errors in transcribed quotations usually do not affect either their integrity or Gell’s use of them (e.g.,

the Tahitian myths quoted on pp. 124-125 from Henry's *Ancient Tahiti* [1928:339-340, 364-366]). But on p. 243 he uses a quotation from an article by Sahlins, including part of a Maori *karakia*, which is rendered bizarre by having tagged on to it the first line of Sahlins's subsequent explanatory comment. And a lengthy, but inaccurately transcribed, extract on p. 139 from Banks's *Tahitian Journal* of 1769 omits enough of the ritual to imply that Banks described it incorrectly.

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