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## BOOK REVIEW FORUM

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Deborah B. Gewertz and Frederick K. Errington, *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. xiv, 264, illus., references, index. US\$44.50 cloth; \$14.95 paper.

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My approach to this excellent ethnography is not based on assessing its contribution to the ethnography of a particular geographical area nor to a particular theoretical paradigm in anthropology. In the spirit of revealing “where you’re coming from,” I take the selfish point of view of a teacher--of introductory sociocultural anthropology, of upper-division and graduate courses in kinship and social structure (Graburn 1971c), the anthropology of art (Graburn 1971a), and the anthropology of tourism (Graburn 1980, 1983b, 1988)--and of a researcher--of village-based societies “during the period of transition between a regional and a world system,” in the words of Gewertz and Errington (p. 20) (Graburn 1969, 1971b, 1981, 1982), of non-Western arts as they become commoditized (Graburn 1976, 1978, 1979, 1984, 1987), and of modern tourism, its motivations and impacts (Graburn 1977, 1983a; Graburn and Jafari 1991).

As a teacher who views this work as a potential case study at both the lower- and upper-division levels, I find it praiseworthy. It might be used for introductory courses as well as those on art and tourism, and it could also be helpful in teaching psychological anthropology, social change and development, ethnographic writing, the anthropology of Oceania, gender, religion, and particularly ritual.

I emphasize ritual, for this book of “collective biography” (pp. 20, 208) is also constructed around a number of accounts of rituals--initiation, environmental magic, community court, funerary, and so on--that tie together the major themes such as social entailment versus “freedom,” political and magical power, traditional and new economic relations, and the penetration of the ideologies and institutions of the state and the First World into villagers’ lives. These rituals, illustrated by excessively dark photographs, are described in great detail. The authors emphasize the actions (and motivations) of real (named) persons in their historico-biographical context, and the incorporation of a melange of the revered ancestral objects, modern paraphernalia such as paper money and canned fish, and outsiders such as tourists and the ethnographers. These accounts are clear, accessible even to nonanthropologists, thoroughly unnostalgic and believable, and analytically satisfactory in making the connections within these “twisted histories” without resort to didactic paradigms.

The same qualities apply to the rest of the ethnography, which consists mainly of *parts* of biographies carefully chosen to illustrate the authors’ aims in making understandable the recent history and personal experiences of a sample of the Chambri. For instance, we have “mytho-practical” ancestral accounts from men used as claims to land and power (p. 239), the biography of two sacred drums illustrating the commoditization of artifacts, and histories of bride-price debts, tangled marriages, and infidelities. These accounts show the “anomie” of town life *and* the inevitable connections to prior village relationships. The sad tale of the life and death of Nick Ambri, “a Chambri James Dean” (pp. 128-145), illustrates the predicament of young people who challenge the existing patriarchal gerontocracy. Another instance is the story of Godfried Kolly who, inspired by the ethnographers, attempted to write his own complete history and ethnography of the Chambri, not only to record dying knowledge but to syncretize Catholicism and Chambri religion and to augment his own personal power by gathering together all the closely guarded knowledge of the clan elders. Still another is the reaction to the murder of a daughter of Chambri in town, which illuminates Chambri conceptions of their relation to “the State.”

However, all these wonderful, lively, and readable accounts do not add up to a complete ethnography. I feel that concordant with post-modern fashion, the authors have left the text, however good, a “thing of shreds and patches” (Lowie 1920:441), hence their enigmatic title, *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts*. As already noted, this book is not really a “collective biography” or even a collection of biographies. It is

collection of selected, rich part-biographies woven together with “thick descriptions” of key events. What is missing? Could it be remedied? Does it matter? These were questions I asked as I perused the book. The reader never gets a complete enough description of the Chambri villages or of life there to form a mental picture of the society. Surprisingly, I find myself with a better grasp of Chambri Camp, the “fourth village,” in the town of Wewak.

By contrast with more “classical” structural-functional ethnographies (e.g., on Dobu, the Tikopia, the Nuer, the Plateau Tonga, or the Taka-miut Eskimo), one can see that certain topics of present anthropological concern and interest are foregrounded. These include village-town-state relations, the generational break in values, the constitution of persons and identity in a plural society, the interactions with and sales of artifacts to tourists. On the other hand, present only as background data, if at all, are matters that used to loom large in anthropological ethnography and theory, such as the layout and economic workings of the villages, the “imponderabilia” of everyday life, the domestic arrangements, material culture and styles of housing, and the complex kinship and marital alliance system. I was intrigued, for example, by the multiple but scattered references to the functioning of the system of patrilineal clans, the two moiety systems (marital and initiation), and the system of marriage negotiations and bride-price. I thought it would be a good exercise to ask my students to try to construct these normative structural-functional systems from these provocative but disconnected data.

I am even more surprised at the omission of some key data that could reveal instruments of acculturation. For instance, the authors make clear that the Chambri are staunch Catholics and occasionally note the use of the mission radio and of the presence of priests in the village. But one is never told about the history and nature of conversion; the place, shape, size, and uses of the mission; its effects on education and literacy; and the residence or frequency of visitation of Catholic priests (or other white people except the tourists and ethnographers). In a sense, the data selected might even be said to exoticize the acculturated lives of the Chambri. What else is missing? Possibly my observations and questions are unfair, because the missing topics may well be presented in the authors’ prior publications (which are referred to about twice a page throughout the book). If so, this overreferencing does little to increase the book’s suitability for use as a case study in undergraduate courses.

As would be expected, the authors are best at elucidating the subjects on which they focus. These include the overlapping topics of develop-

ment, art, and cultural identity. Particularly valuable is their presentation of both the complex local and the "etic" points of view. The Chambri are all in favor of the nationally (and internationally) promoted idea of "development," but what it means to them depends on their place within the Chambri system. The older men want to use new economic opportunities to bolster their power in the ancestrally-based big-man system by building men's houses and holding ceremonies that attract tourists (who pay entry fees and buy made-for-sale ancestral carvings). The parental generation is convinced of the value of literacy and formal education. In addition to "exam-passing" and "job-getting" values, literacy (itself a symbol of development) has high prestige in the never-ending competition for claims to power in village politics.

School education, which most Chambri see as a road to lucrative positions outside the villages (over 40 percent of the adults live outside of the three Chambri villages), should, in turn, lead to flows of remittances for the support and development of the villages. Yet the younger generation finds the demands for repayment of old obligations through remittances-- even from other town Chambri--to be so burdensome that they almost sever their ties from their families back home. The younger generation, both men and women, see development (and moving to town) as a means of enhancing their freedom and individualism; they try to avoid the entailments of the old system, of repayment of generations of debts, of deference to elders and threats of sorcery, of the politics of bride-price and of arranged marriages of women to older men. The meanings of development are presented through vignettes and mini-biographies and by presentation of many written documents (Chambri school essays, recently composed songs, political tracts, ethno-ethnography, and so forth).

Surprisingly, perhaps, the meaning of development to Chambri women is less thoroughly explored, for we are told that "Chambri women . . . sought to achieve worth through reproductive closure--by reproducing those who had given [them] life. . . . In contrast to women, Chambri men sought to achieve worth by competing with other men in terms of relative power" (p. 110). Thus men can achieve in any sphere--traditional, business, town living, or state employment--whereas we are led to believe women are still bound to reproduction.

Chambri notions of personal and ethnic identity are similarly multiple and well explored, yet all share the conviction that they are still Chambri. Whether in Wewak or Port Moresby, all descendants of the villages still speak Chambri, though they may also be fluent in pidgin and English. Whether they consider themselves as nostalgically tradi-

tional or modern and developed--and even in their rebellion against the old men whom they consider to be coercive anachronisms--they all use the homeland as the geographical and ideological reference point in their lives. Only one person-- a young man who plays the guitar in tourist hotels in town-- seems to doubt the primacy of his identity as Chambri. Regardless of status, all fear the threat of sorcery, and most try to make at least some remittances in response to the never-ending village-generated entailments.

Why this unshaken sense of ethnic identity persists is partially explained: Chambri for the most part do not see themselves as diminished by development, education, or monetary success. Indeed, they have successfully incorporated these elements into their ritual and political life. They still see themselves in opposition to other ethnic groups, both as historical fact and in terms of modern competition for land rights, political influence, and economic progress. Most Chambri have a marked disdain for identity-eroding "town life," with its increasing rates of drunkenness, violent crime, anomie, and real poverty. Even renegade young Chambri look to the villages for stability and personal roots.

Less explored are the alternatives, the obverse of ethnic identity. The authors paint a picture of "the New Guinea state [as] only partial and ineffectual" (p. 191). Except for a few very elite, there is no meaningful identity available at the national level and only the secondary identity as "a Sepik" at the regional level. There is no sense of general citizenship and civil rights; there is no dominant ethnic group for minority peoples to emulate or join (such as the Ashanti in Ghana or the Russians in Russia). What else could one become but a "modern Chambri"?

Above and beyond the ethnographic and analytical goals of the book, the main aim of the authors is to explore the possibility of writing politically correct ethnography. They are sensitive to the recent attacks on ethnographic authority, citing nearly all the appropriate sources-- Bourdieu, Clifford, Fabian, Gramsci, Marcus, Sahlins, Taussig, Wolf and Worsley; and they know all the postmodern choices for postcolonial ethnographers, briefly exploring and rejecting them (e.g., "although Chambri lives may be viewed as texts, we must not be so preoccupied with textual concerns focussing on representation as to forget that they were also lives" [p. 18]). They counterattack and point out that "many of those most active in the development of the critique are no longer engaged in non-Western ethnography" (p. 18) and "ethnographers may be part of the problem of hegemony, but not to write ethnography is not part of the solution" (p. 209; cf. Fardon 1990 [uncited] for the most

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comprehensive and incisive consideration of the many critiques of ethnographic authority).

Within this self-conscious and relatively successful "self-critique" they do not cite other successful reflexive explorations (e.g., Dumont 1978; Rabinow 1977), but they do assert that "we have intentionally written ourselves into this ethnography." This is true, especially in their assertions of "kinship" with selected informants, their descriptions of the part that their command of literacy has played in individual claims and power struggles, and their financial and material support and employment of many Chambri.

Nevertheless, there are two matters that disturb me. The first parallels my above-mentioned complaint about what is emphasized and what is slighted in the overall ethnographic picture: I cannot make out clearly what the ethnographers did apart from gathering these vignettes; for example, where did they live and what were their general relations to most Chambri? There are numerous statements such as "when we got to the village" and "when we arrived in the middle of . . .," which leave the reader wondering where they were and what they were doing most of the time. Secondly, even when they "wrote themselves in," their generally good descriptions leave an impression of flat, or no, affect. They make themselves sound like Malinowski's "rational [straw] man" (1935), and, in contrast to the Chambri themselves, they appear entirely emotionless and mechanical. Perhaps they should have read more of Dumont, Rabinow, and Malinowski.

To conclude, this is a wonderful, sensitive, and rich ethnography. It leaves the reader with neither the possibility of picturing the Chambri as faceless culture-bearers nor of feeling either completely nostalgic and antithetical to or fully supportive of "development." These are prime reasons, in spite of the unsettling highlighting and downplaying of certain topics, why this book should be read by professional and student anthropologists alike.

As ethnographers who must have felt increasingly "under fire" from all sides during their period of long-term research with the same peoples (cf. Colson 1979, which they cite), Gewertz and Errington's book has given us a rousing example of the value garnered by withstanding the attack and emerging victorious both on the "scientific" front and in the eyes of the Chambri: "As they saw it--and we agreed--allowing and helping us to do anthropology among them had socially entailed us to them: they had extended a generosity to us, for which we should reciprocate. This book has been intended as an acknowledgement of our relationship" (p. 202).

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