
REVIEWS

Nancy McDowell, *The Mundugumor: From the Field Notes of Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune*. Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Inquiry. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. Pp. 337, figures, tables, genealogies, diagrams, bibliography, index. US\$45.00 cloth.

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Few New Guinea peoples have received such a bad ethnographic press as the Mundugumor of the Yuat River. Picture a "fierce group of cannibals," "gay, hard, arrogant," "proud, harsh, and violent," "competitive, aggressively sexed, jealous and ready to see and avenge insult, delighting in display, in action, in fighting." Reluctant, rejecting mothers, the women were as tough and assertive as the men. Thus Margaret Mead presented a bleakly savage portrait of Mundugumor ethos in her popular classic on male and female socialization, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (London, 1935). In that book, the Mundugumor formed the centerpiece of a triptych of contrasting Sepik cultures, set between the Mountain Arapesh and the Tchambuli (modern Chambri).

In late 1932, Mead and her second husband, Reo Fortune, sailed up the Yuat just three years after the river region had been pacified by the Australian Administration. The Mundugumor were to be the third culture they had studied together. They had planned for eight months, but stayed for less than three. Both, apparently, found the Mundugumor difficult and disagreeable. Working conditions were also unusually tough. It was the hot and steamy rainy season, the village was flooded, the mosquitoes were at their worst. Not least among the irritants, their professional marriage was beginning to founder. Small wonder that

Mead's brilliant ethnographic eye was becoming jaundiced: In *Black-berry Winter* (New York, 1972) she admits she "loathed" Mundugumor culture. Fortune kept his feelings to himself and published nothing substantial on Mundugumor.

Mead's practical and personal difficulties aside, sixty years later we can clearly see that she was ensnared by simplistic constructs--Benedictine rather than Boasian--of culture and personality. This is nowhere more obvious than in her paradoxical assertion that it was the misfits and "deviants" who kept Mundugumor culture going. It was a degenerate, disorganized, and dysfunctional society, she believed, whose increasing complexity had made it unworkable. Mundugumor culture was "broken," Mead declared, and had "stopped like a clock" (a view she confirmed during a brief return visit in 1971).

Prompted by Nancy McDowell (who had worked upriver in Bun) and the theoretical interests of Lévi-Strauss, Mead began in the early seventies to draft a more comprehensive ethnography of the Mundugumor. She did not live to complete it but McDowell had promised to do so, and the result is this fascinating book based largely on Mead's manuscript and field notes. Characteristically, Mead's notes were clear and methodically organized, Fortune's scrambled and "practically unreadable."

One of the virtues of McDowell's book is that it rehabilitates the Mundugumor (nowadays called the Biwat) and dislodges them from their unenviable position near the top of the Least-Likeable League of world cultures. By dint of a careful and dispassionate reading of the field notes, McDowell finds they allow a more charitable interpretation of the Mundugumor of sixty years ago. During a two-week visit of her own in 1981, she interrogated them afresh. Now Christian and comparatively affluent, she found them "warm, open and generous . . . as well as assertive and volatile." In contrast to Mead, McDowell "liked them very much" (p. 298). The portrait of the Mundugumor that emerges from these pages is a believable one.

Not the least interesting theme of the book is the activity of fieldwork itself as conducted by two legendary ethnographers, the most dynamic duo in the history of Melanesian anthropology. Fortune set the agenda for their division of labor in Mundugumor: Mead was to do "the language, the children and the technology while he would specialize on the social organization, kinship, warfare and religion" (p. 10). The absurdity of this arrangement will be obvious, even if we did not happen to know that Fortune's linguistic abilities were far superior to Mead's. Moreover, their collaboration was becoming strained and at times they

worked at cross-purposes, though they worked alternately with the best informant, "There are indications," McDowell says with more than a hint of understatement, "that they were not fully sharing data with each other" (p. 289).

Thanks partly to this historical depth of field, this is a rich and fascinating book. The ethnographic materials (on economy, trade, warfare, religion, initiation, and so forth, as well as on kinship and marriage) are remarkable enough to warrant a straightforward narrative, and to this end McDowell writes clearly and well. Notwithstanding her obligation to Mead, the temptation to adopt a postmodernist stance must have been considerable. The ingredients are almost irresistible: the field notes of two extraordinarily gifted and experienced ethnographers; "fierce cannibal tribe" on the cusp of colonial transformation; the author's own visit to their Christian descendants half a century later, and the possibility for multivocality and contrasting representations that all these factors allow. Yet the author has wisely eschewed stylistic tricks and resisted making extravagant theoretical claims. Her tone is considerate of the people and respectful of her sources; indeed, she leans over backward to be fair to Mead, concluding the book with a tribute to her "special talents as an observer and ethnographer" (p. 303).

For kinship specialists, the most interesting third of the book will be McDowell's retrieval of the full data on Mundugumor kinship and marriage, followed by her reinterpretation of the controversial "rope." Mead had deduced that the "rope" (*geun*) was a descent line or group recruited through alternating sexes in adjacent generations (such that mother and son belong to a different line than father and daughter). This gave rise to an anomalous "system" of which many anthropologists have been understandably skeptical.

McDowell skillfully disentangles Mead's and Fortune's evidence on social organization and reassembles it in the form of an elegant transactional model. She distinguishes between two contrasting modes of exchange (of valuables and ritual services) that operate within and between generations. The "rope" unites them into a single complex. Thus, in a detailed technical argument, McDowell shows that the marriage system and its intricate obligatory exchanges makes perfect sense if predicated on brother-sister exchange. The ideal marriage system entailed third bilateral cross-cousin marriage with brother-sister exchange, such that the descendants of a brother-sister pair reunite in marriage in the fourth generation (p. 278).

In this scheme, a "rope" is neither a descent line nor a kin group, but a comprehensive metaphor for "the complex interweaving of relation-

ships and ties between classificatory brother-sister pairs and their children over time, ties that began and ended with brother-sister exchange marriage" (p. 269). In other words, the alternating female-male-female line of relatives was not, as Mead supposed, the "rope" itself, nor a line of descent, least of all a "lineage" (as Mead herself had begun to call it in *Male and Female* [London, 1949]), but one of the two strands of alternating sex links that comprised each "rope."

So far as I can judge, McDowell's model is utterly convincing. If anything, she is too modest about her own analytical achievement and perhaps too generous in excusing Mead her patent errors. In essence, "rope" refers to a system of exchange, not to a system of descent. One reason Mead got it wrong (Fortune, too, though his notes show that he twigged the "rope" metaphor) was that she lacked a rigorous concept of descent. Another, of course, was that neither of them spoke the Biwat language; they worked entirely in pidgin. Though a few minor problems remain with McDowell's model, there is no denying its cogency and elegance. The Mundugumor, alias Biwat, are finally comprehensible.

In brief, this is an ethnography with unusual appeal to anthropologists (and anyone else) interested in the Sepik region, in complex exchange and exotic kinship systems, in Margaret Mead's energetic career, or in the history and anthropology of ethnography in Papua New Guinea. The book is handsomely produced by the Smithsonian in its excellent Ethnographic Inquiry series. The omission of maps, however, is a sorry one; I cannot imagine why anyone should think that the precise location of Mundugumor villages is unimportant.