

Brenda Johnson Clay, *Mandak Realities: Person and Power in Central New Ireland*. New Brunswick, N. J. : Rutgers University Press, 1986. Pp. xv, 309, bibliography, index, notes. \$40 cloth.

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A Mandak myth recounts the life of Songalarala, who lived by exchanging sardines, which he caught in great abundance, for taro, produced by the women of the village. Finally, his fellow villagers, motivated by jealousy, banished him. Songalarala's "plight is the vulnerability that accompanies the development and realization of autonomy in individual knowledge and use of power" (p. 293). Clay uses this myth to underscore the theme of her work--the tension between society and individual, between sociality and the autonomous use of power. The *use* of this power, primarily in sorcery, is seen as a "foil to a common sense world of predictability, a world insufficient for Mandak sociality" (p. 49). Citing Geertz's idea of magic as a "means to certify the common sense world" (p. 36), Clay suggests that the Mandak need magic to relieve the boredom of an otherwise completely predictable universe.

"The Mandak person does not replicate the Western individual in standing ideologically apart from either a 'natural world' or 'society'" (p. 293). A concept of social personhood is employed that encompasses the "relational and autonomous" aspects of Mandak persons. "Persons are delineated both as relational beings formed through human nurturing and as autonomous entities capable of socially significant action" (p. 115). These separate aspects of Mandak personhood are manifest in the emphasis on female nurturance and male competition. "Women are not expected to assert autonomous images for their value is relational, through the growth of clans and the support of life through sustenance" (p. 81). Competition between big men, on the other hand, is "fueled by rumor and gossip, fed by Mandak belief that appearances do not reveal intentions" (p. 92). Thus female nurturance is associated with the development and growth of clans and subclans while male "autonomy" is "based on the premise of an individual capacity for private thought

and self-determined actions" (p. 30). These dichotomies are explored through a series of contexts and domains.

The Mandak inhabit a number of hamlets and villages in central New Ireland and are organized into matrilineal moities, clans, and subclans. Individual nuclear families form the core residential units with men's houses being regularly occupied by unmarried males and by married males during ritual activities (p. 61). While there is evidence of frequent shifts in residence (p. 68), most families live in the subclan hamlets of the male head of household. Relying on fishing and slash and burn cultivation of taro and sweet potatoes for their subsistence, they also hunt wild pig and herd domesticated pigs that are used primarily in ritual contexts of feasting. Mortuary feasts form a vital part of social life. "Feasts dominate Mandak energies, wealth and attention" (p. xi). Gender distinctions, while important, are merely one aspect of social personhood. Age is also an important power differentiator, with the "pattern of deference and control" finding "ideological support in concepts of innate gender contrasts and social maturation with age" (p. 65).

The Mandak universe is "infused with invisible energy" (p. 35), which can be manipulated by individuals. The control of this energy is manifest in sorcery and magic. Everyone over the age of twenty-five knows some spells (p. 39). Sorcery, which is used for the promotion of crop growth, may also be a response to perceived inequalities (p. 41) and as such demands certain Mandak responses that have far-reaching implications for Mandak social interaction. However, not all the power in the universe is available for human manipulation. The Mandak share their universe with a variety of spirits that are "outside human sociality" but who can, on occasion, inhabit humans, as in the case of *erogas* (sing, *egas*), "spirits." The fear of these spirits is associated with the generalized Mandak fear of an "unannounced presence" (p. 51). Thus, human/spirit represents another underlying dichotomy.

Distinctions of gender, power, and substantiality, then, are the background against which Mandak day-to-day social interaction is played out. Normal sociality is manifest in gardening and the production of pigs and wealth. Success in gardening, for the Mandak, is a product of hard work and the successful use of power (p. 88). However, such success must be carefully guarded as it may inspire envy and invite sorcery (p. 92). Gardening activities, under the direction of a manager (p. 83), may be shared with others of the same subclan who will not practice sorcery against their fellow gardeners. Avoidance characterizes the Mandak response to a variety of conflict situations. Possible signs of inequality are hidden behind dissemblance (p. 101), possession of

wealth is hidden through farming out pigs (p. 103), and “expressions of autonomy” (p. 93) are carefully contrived in controlled contexts.

Mortuary feasts provide a “dialectical counterpoint” to daily life (p. 108) and are explored in detail (for example, the extended treatment of the mortuary feast sequence *elokpanga*, pp. 111-244). Here, the distinction is significant between natural death, which occurs when one’s “work is finished” (p. 111), and death due to sorcery, the “premature termination of a life still energized” (p. 114). Associated with these rituals are a host of activities necessary for the production of garden crops and the increase of wealth and pig herds. Many of the activities associated with the various stages of planning and hosting a mortuary feast are concerned with the regulation of rain to insure a good harvest and here, both in initiation rites and the hiring of rain magicians, Mandak sociality extends across hamlet and clan lines to encompass a greater polity.

This is not to say that *Mandak Realities* is a flat, synchronous account of Mandak life. Clay is aware of the continuity and change in Mandak existence, especially since the disruptions of World War II. Mandak life is presented as consisting of “alternating sequences of daily dispersed living and more centralized feasting interactions” (p. 247). The segregation of males and females has declined, but while many Mandak activities continue as before, some aspects of the society have disappeared, such as the stronger forms of magic and the ritualized male fishing. Attempts at cooperative cash cropping of copra disintegrated under the centrifugal tendencies of Mandak society (pp. 258ff.).

The penultimate chapter of the book provides a fine contrast with the Usen Barok people recently described by Roy Wagner, Clay focuses on the differences between the traditional aspects of Mandak and Barok big men to account for the cooperative successes of the Barok in the money economy and the attempts and failures of the Mandak.

What, then, is the real argument of *Mandak Realities*? Most anthropologists, after all, would insist that they are describing reality. For Clay, Mandak realities are not available at the level of sensory perceptions. They consist, rather, of a set of underlying principles or premises upon which Mandak construction of reality and behavior depend. Mandak sociability is conducted against or is informed by this underlying set of structural contrasts/contradictions (male/female, spirit/human, everyday/ritual, subsistence/feasting, elder/younger, senior/junior, etc.). While one might attempt to make sense of each of these poles in isolation, a complete picture of Mandak social life can only be presented if one is also aware of how each pole affects the other and how each pair

is played out in other domains. It is not an easy argument to convey and occasionally Clay seems to fall victim to her own discourse. Despite a number of infelicities of expression and a number of minor errors that the editor as well as the author should have caught, *Mandak Realities* does indeed manage to present the reader with an enlightening picture of a society whose members are struggling to assert themselves against the weight of an egalitarian ethos.