
REVIEWS

John LeRoy, *Fabricated World: An Interpretation of Kewa Tales*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985. Pp. xii, 319. \$28.95 cloth.

John LeRoy, ed., *Kewa Tales*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985. Pp. xxv, 251. \$21.50 paper.

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Of the four book-length studies of myth in Papua New Guinea, it is remarkable if coincidental that three of these deal with people of the southern Highlands, from Lake Kutubu in the west to Mt. Karimui in the east. The Kewa, centrally located within this region, are the subject of LeRoy's *Fabricated World*, an interpretation of tales collected by the author. There is an accompanying volume, *Kewa Tales*, which contains the complete narratives. This centrality of the Kewa is reflected in the way *Fabricated World* finds itself sandwiched between the similar theoretical positions found in Wagner's (1978) and Weiner's (1988) analyses of Daribi and Foi myth. It would be fascinating to compare the mythological similarities of these three societies, and then contrast the anthropological "myths" of interpretation, discussed by LeRoy in his epilogue to *Fabricated World*, that inform the three studies.

The Kewa comprise a language group of about forty thousand people. They live in scattered or clustered homesteads on a plateau of the Southern Highlands Province. What makes the Kewa different from the Daribi and Foi, and therefore comparatively interesting, is that Kewa are culturally closer to Highlands people such as the Mendi and Wiru

than they are to the fringe Highlanders of Kutubu and Karimui. LeRoy points to similarities between Kewa and Daribi narratives, yet what distinguishes them is that the Kewa tell tales, acknowledged as fictions, and have few myths, accounts of "real" events. The author does not explain why the Kewa and their Highlands neighbors do not have the extensive mythology of fringe people, or why myth does not appear to have a similar primacy for the former. It is possible, using LeRoy's analysis, to suggest reasons for this difference. For Kewa, tales are allegorical; they do not rest upon cosmological propositions. It is exchange, not mythology, that constitutes the social order. The tales may deal with wealth and the problems of reciprocity, but they reflect upon these issues rather than generate exchange as a cosmological principle (it is quite likely that the reverse is the case).

Because the tales are fictions, LeRoy argues that they can be analyzed as literature. They show more similarities to the *Decameron* than to Genesis. Tales are narratives that comment on the world presently lived in, and can be "read" and submitted to textual analysis in much the same way as any other form of literature. LeRoy is precise in differentiating between tales and legends, some of which are mythic, but one is left wondering to what extent the schema he has devised for tale interpretation are applicable to myth--and if not, then how can the Kewa and their tales be usefully compared to the literature that deals only with Melanesian mythology? Once LeRoy establishes the status of tales as literature, he seems prepared to discuss their mythlike functions.

LeRoy's analysis is somewhat eclectic, yet this complements his exposition on Kewa tales, which similarly are "built" from a stock of component parts. *Fabricated World* combines the structural poetics of authors like Barthes and Todorov with the formalism exemplified by Propp. These approaches are not uncritically accepted by LeRoy. He discusses their methodologies and shortcomings, and recognizes that the only way to interpret the tales is to develop a more culture-bound approach, to see the tales as embedded within Kewa culture although not produced by it. This is where LeRoy adopts a hermeneutic position, making for an interesting combination of Barthes, Todorov, and Ricoeur and producing a theoretical triangle that puts flesh on the bones of an otherwise language-oriented analysis. If the result is sometimes ambiguous, it is difficult to know if this is the product of eclecticism or of the ambiguous nature of the tales themselves. Perhaps this is not important if his analysis gives the reader a solid understanding of the Kewa and their tales, and in this LeRoy succeeds admirably.

LeRoy admits his debt to structuralism but does not follow a strict structural view of meaning. The tales deal with oppositions but these are not logical; rather they are of the moral/ethical kind. Tales do not resolve contradictions in social life but serve as vehicles for their expression. LeRoy uses the techniques of structuralism--syntactic/semantic constructions of tale episodes, episode (mytheme) columns, the location of central oppositions such as that between being and nonbeing, examination of episodes from a corpus of tales (rather than isolated examples) for their "transformations," and so forth--without accepting that meaning is reducible to mental structures or relations between signs. The transformations between episodes in tales are to show how meaning is found in intertextuality, not that different versions are attempts to resolve basic contradictions in social life. For LeRoy, meaning is culturally specific and expressed through metaphor, which derives its force not just through intertextuality but from the interrelationship between tales and the "real" world. The meaning of narratives is conceptual and figurative, and has a moral, not a mathematical, force.

LeRoy, perhaps following Ricoeur's advice, returns the sign to the world. Yet this is a world that is at once real, the domain of experience, and unreal, the domain of tales. LeRoy's style and ability are evidenced by his ability to convince the reader that neither of these worlds is the most authentic. Tales, in fact, contain real and unreal elements--truths are presented as fictions and fictions as possible truths (in the sense of alternatives for social existence). The tension between reality and possible realities is what underlies the tales, or rather that they are not diametrically opposed but part of the same fabric.

The tales LeRoy analyzes deal with kinship, ghosts, skin changers, tricksters, and other figures. The characters are often exaggerations or aberrations of cultural roles and categories, such as affine or sister, and are used to fabricate an alternative model of society, another world of meaning, with which the Kewa can contemplate notions of morality and existence. LeRoy is compelling in his account of this fabricated world, yet an uncertainty lies at the heart of his analysis. This stems not so much from his theoretical eclecticism, which is to be recommended, but from his readiness to admit to tales with which his interpretative framework cannot deal and his recognition that at different levels this framework reveals or imposes a structure in the tales. Arguably, this is a problem for anthropology in general. Indeed, *Fabricated World* could be viewed as an extended myth that deals with a central contradiction of the discipline--that it fabricates its own world of meaning to account for the authenticity of its subject. The problem is in whether uncer-

tainty is related to the ambiguity of the tales or the impossibility of ever "knowing" another society.

Yet I find myself uncomfortable with analyses that, because of the contradictions within the discipline and its sometimes cosmic preoccupations, render anthropological interpretation as "like" myth. LeRoy concludes *Fabricated World* in a spirit of almost poststructural gloom, hoping that his analysis will "keep the storytelling going" in the event that all interpretation proves hopeless. This is a peculiar way to authenticate the anthropological process--interpretation provides another context for intertextuality, and more meaning is supposed to emerge. Analysis thus provides a rival literary form that competes for meaning with the original tales. This striving for literariness produces some vivid passages but perhaps tends to add a veil of obscurity to what the tales reveal.

Finally, a word on how *Fabricated World* should be read. It is necessary to understand what LeRoy means when he refers to the particular devices used for the interpretation of tales. These are "frame," "function," and "sequence." The devices are not difficult to understand, but reading *Fabricated World* can be cumbersome as one refers back to other episodes and to the appendixes, as well as to the companion volume that contains tales in their entirety (and that may be read just for enjoyment). The publication of a companion volume is to be commended. It provides the reader with access to all of the tales used to support LeRoy's interpretation, and future students of narrative will be grateful. As a contribution to Melanesian ethnography and the analysis of narrative, *Fabricated World* deserves to become a classic and a model for elegant anthropological discourse.

REFERENCES

Wagner, R. *Lethal Speech*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978.

Weiner, J. *The Heart of the Pearl Shell*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.