
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Richard J. Parmentier, *The Sacred Remains: Myth, History, and Polity in Belau*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Pp. xxiii, 341, maps, illus., glossary, index. US\$15.95 paper, US\$49.95 cloth.

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Richard Parmentier's provocative book, *The Sacred Remains: Myth, History, and Polity in Belau*, presents evidence from the Palau Islands to show how history and myth articulate values of the historian and his or her social group. Stories told and retold reveal messages that are specific to time, place, source, and circumstance. These narratives and texts also provide material for analyzing culture-specific principles structuring political, social and temporal domains.

Parmentier did his research in the district of Ngeremlengui in the Palau Islands (Republic of Belau). This is a district of great historic importance where myths, stories of the old days, and histories are integral parts of its heritage.

Many of us take for granted a whole post-Enlightenment set of legal, scientific, and epistemological assumptions and may consider myths and orally transmitted stories of the old days less credible than written histories. For Palauans credible evidence takes the form of chants, properly told stories, and *olangch*, the enduring signs that an event took place. These *olangch* may be stone monuments or other features of the landscape that endure, or they may even be idiosyncratic regional behavioral and customary characteristics that transcend generations and testify to past events that gave rise to these traditions.

Parmentier's book begins with a chapter describing Palau, its prehis-

tory and Austronesian roots, and the history of its relations with Europe, Japan, and the United States. Subsequent chapters describe the internal geopolitics of Palau and of the Ngeremlengui district with reference to historic events-wars and truces-that characterized precontact Palau. He peppers the text with various versions of tales of the very old days and more recent times. He analyzes these stories, their physical testaments, *olangch*, and Palauan social relations according to a set of metaphoric structural-principle "diagrams" that give them meaning.

By considering history a domain that can be observed from various perspectives, Parmentier forces the Western reader to take stock of our own told and retold, written and rewritten histories. It is a truism that as soon as an event has occurred and the observers, having blinked their eyes, begin to relate it, the facts become distorted. Even the tape recorder and the camera, by the very fact that they are held and aimed by a human observer, do not give an "etic," objectively true side of the story.

After reading Parmentier's book, we cannot help but pause and consider our own obsession with historical documentation and the biases that these sources contain. Historical narratives are dependent on historians who, by sifting through their "facts" and by systematizing them for their audience, inevitably distort them. We are constantly revising our histories as our contemporary perspective tempts us to emphasize some events and diminish others. Parmentier forces his reader to grapple with the whole issue of the nature of documentation.

Parmentier shows how history and symbolism represent principles that organize the social and political order. He repeats and analyzes stories as told to him by different historians to make the point that social rank and geopolitical position influence historical narrative. Then, in final chapter that makes the reader smile with pleasant recognition, he relates Palauan stories that are linked historically to events with which we Westerners may be familiar from our versions of Palauan history: the visit of the Antelope's Captain Wilson, the mid-nineteenth century visits of Semper and Cheyne, the purchase of guns from O'Keefe, and the retaliatory fire-bombing of Melekeok after its citizens allegedly looted O'Keefe's ship. These milestones in a Westerner's history of Palau suddenly become only incidental to other events more salient to the Palauan historian. a

Palauans, like everyone else, make selective use of their histories to argue land cases in court, to justify the succession of a leader, to situate the new capital city, and even to persuade the U.S. Congress that certain recent political positions have historical foundation. Symbols of

historical events, the *olangch* that Parmentier describes in his book, are also continually manipulated to give new meaning to old events. One sees today the conscious "*olangch* - ification" of things in modern Palau with future histories in mind.

Each of the stories Parmentier tells is its own gem worth reading totally independent of the rest of the text. Many Palauans are interested in collecting their own stories and reading whatever has been written about them. In the early 1970s, in fact, the Palau Community Action Agency amassed an extensive set of files on the myths and histories of each district of Palau. Parmentier made good use of these files, and thanks to his research, his notes may be the only extant record of this information: All of the files and the building that housed them burned to the ground in the early eighties. This loss and the additional historical narratives he transcribed make Parmentier's field notes and research materials an extraordinarily valuable resource.

I note, optimistically, that Palau has now embarked on a new project to collect local histories under the supervision of the Office of Historic Preservation. One volume is in press, a second is currently being edited, and a third is on the drawing board.

Scattered throughout the book are innumerable other interesting pieces of information that testify to Parmentier's meticulous research. There are fascinating footnotes on Proto-Austronesian roots of Palauan words and customs, a thorough review of archaeological work in Palau, and a plethora of interesting details on European and Japanese contacts in Palau.

Only a few weaknesses to the book come to mind. Most are so minor as to be virtually insignificant. Ngkeklau, for example, mentioned on page 97, is in Ngerard, not Ngerechelong, and Machiko Aoyagi, mentioned on pages 74 and 141, is a "she," not a "he."

Parmentier makes the perfectly justifiable decision to use correct modern orthography for almost all native terms and proper names. In one place, namely table 1 on page 62, he should perhaps have made concession to older conventions more familiar to many readers by inserting a fifth column with "frequently encountered alternative spellings" of district names. In this column would go, for instance, Koror, Kayangel, Airai, Peleliu, and Angaur. a

Some of Parmentier's discourse is a bit difficult to understand on first reading. The review of Charles Sanders Peirce's theories and the discussion of "diagrammatic icons" could have been made clearer for the reader not well versed in semiotics. Still, however, Parmentier's style is refreshingly lucid in comparison to that of Michael Silverstein, the

author of the foreword. I would hate to think that a reader who encounters terms such as “configurationality” and “subsequentiality” before starting the text proper would be discouraged from continuing.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Richard Parmentier’s work is a model of precision, depth, and integrity with a message to members of any culture professing a reverence for history and the icons that represent it. But the highest compliments should come from the people of Ngeremlengui. Parmentier’s tireless and patient work with his primary informant, Malsol Ngiraibuuch Ngiraklang, one of the best recognized authorities on Palauan history, earned him a title in the hierarchy of chiefs in Ngeremlengui. When I was writing the outline for this review, I happened to meet a man from Ngeremlengui who was attending a meeting in Washington. He had also read Parmentier’s book and commented, “On a scale of ten, I give Rick’s book a nine plus.”