

Roy Wagner, *Asiwinarong: Ethos, Image, and Social Power among the Usen Barok of New Ireland*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986. Pp. xxiv, 238. US\$30.00 cloth.

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Papua New Guinea's New Ireland Province is undoubtedly best known in the Western world for its intricate and beguiling *malanggan* carvings, thousands of which are currently housed in European, American, and Australian museums. Yet these compelling ceremonial sculptures have seemed resistant to satisfactory anthropological interpretation. Does such resistance indicate the need for more thorough research or reflect the intervention of too many years of colonial presence? *Asiwinarong*, Roy Wagner's study of the Usen Barok, a culture outside the traditional *malanggan* area of northern New Ireland, may well tell us something of significance about the apparent enigma of these artistic creations.

Some two thousand Barok live in south-central New Ireland, about six hundred of whom speak the Usen dialect and inhabit five villages along the east coast. In 1979-1980 Wagner lived in Bakan village as part of a comparative anthropological effort to explore cultural meanings in ceremonial and daily contexts in New Ireland, along with myself among the Northern Mandak and Marianne George in the west coast Barok village of Kokola. *Asiwinarong* is a study of Usen Barok culture in terms of ethos, in a Batesonian sense, as "a collectively held and collectively felt

motivation and code for conduct, expression, and experience of social and ritual life" (p. 79). Wagner is concerned with the elicitation of Barok ethos, particularly through the "relational protocols" of inter- and intra-moiety interactions and through the iconic and nonverbal images of the *taun* (men's enclosure) and mortuary feasting. The author focuses attention first on dialectical interactions between the matrilineal moieties, Wagner's discussion of joking, avoidance, and respect relationships is particularly adept. Here we come to understand these relationships not as the results of interdictions meant to ease tensions created by kinship categorization, but through the elicitation of relationship and the immediacy of its contingencies, "by challenges that force it into consciousness and set up its renegotiation" (p. 54).

Usen Barok culture emerges in Wagner's book not through discussions of verbally explicated institutions but through cogent considerations of a variety of interrelated consensual images. The latter are not glossable through verbal exegesis, but instead both evoke and contain multiple meanings. Such images are not only visual, but include verbal, trophic, or metaphorical forms that also resist verbal parsing. Wagner explains: "An anthropologist who might set out to get the *real* gloss would be horribly frustrated, because the cultural convention exists at the level of the *image*, not at that of its verbalized gloss" (p. xv). Barok images must be experienced to be understood. Perceptively Wagner shows that social power revolves not around an image's "meaning" but around control over the image and its social effects. The intransigence of cultural forms to verbal exegesis and the nonconsensual nature of cultural meaning have been subjects of some discussion in Melanesian studies (Barth 1975; Keesing 1987; Lewis 1980).

"Power," a compounding of the usual sense of political ascendancy with the term's more esoteric reference, is a common thread running through the diverse *kastams* (cultures) of New Ireland. As Wagner notes for the Usen Barok, "all significant or worthwhile things are grounded in power" (p. 216). Power is confronted here through intriguing discussions of the *tadak* (clan place-spirits), *pidiks* (the "mystery" of power and social cults organized around such mysteries), and finally in its most public form, in the iconic images of the Barok *taun*, men's house and enclosure, and the feasts that actualize social power. Far beyond their northern New Ireland contemporaries, the Usen Barok have honed the visually and ritually expressive power of the men's house and ceremonial feasting to a precision of imagery. The absence of the artistic intricacies of *malanggan* systems are perhaps answered here in the elaboration of the forms and protocol of mortuary ceremonial. Developing and

applying ideas figuring in his earlier works, *Lethal Speech* (Ithaca, 1978) and *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago, 1981), as well as instancing theoretical concepts discussed in *Symbols That Stand for Themselves* (Chicago, 1986), Wagner takes the reader through a succession of Usen mortuary feasts. Here Barok ethos is elicited through actional, visual, and verbal images that are meaningful in their interrelationships rather than in a separate referential sense. In the initial parts of this sequence, which deal with an individual's death, the *taun* and its contained feasting figure as central images whose elicitational power is finally exhausted in the movement from "closed" to "open" feasts. These *taun*-centered feasts are concerned with nurturance and containment in inter- and intra-moiety relationships. In contrast, the final large-scale mortuary celebration, the *kaba*, moves out of the *taun* and again, through visual and verbal imagery and feasting actions, "obviates" or nullifies the social meanings elicited in the earlier mortuary feasts. The *kaba* is about *orong* (big-man, clan leader) successorship. In one dramatic image a potential successor stands on the overturned, uprooted *kaba* tree, and intones, "*Asiwinarong! Asiwinarong!*" (the need of an *orong*) (p. 210). Wagner's analysis of sequences in Barok mortuary feasting involves another example of his "obviation sequence," "a sequence of dialectically related images that returns to, and negates, its own beginning point" (p. 211). In the unfolding of successive mortuary images the Barok are engaged not simply in iconic revelation but also in "a resolution of the social dynamic" (p. 217).

New Ireland contains myriad cultural variations from village to village, with subtle regional shadings among the generalities of matrilineality, power, and mortuary feasting. Roy Wagner's discussion of cultural meaning among the Usen Barok in terms of ethos, image, and social power provides insights not only into this relatively unknown part of New Ireland, but also into other areas of Melanesia and beyond. Too often the anthropologist's desire to explicate cultural meaning in definitive terms ends in a failure to comprehend the production and nature of meaning itself. *Asiwinarong* does not delimit Usen Barok culture to structural, functional, or overly determined systematic forms of anthropological exegesis, but rather opens communication between the anthropological search for explanation and cultures whose consensuality lies in images rather than verbal interpretation. It is within this area of unglossable but evocative images that the "true meanings" of New Ireland's splendid *malanggans* might be sought. Wagner's remarkable study of the Usen Barok demonstrates that the ongoing production and renegotiation of cultural meaning lies in social relationships and com-

monly held images that elicit and contain interpretation. *Asiwinarong* offers provocative insights into recently stated anthropological concerns about the consensuality and nature of cultural meaning.

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